

“La Bella Sicilia: An Unforgettable Ride Through One of the World's Most Famous Islands”

We've all seen the movies that take place in those small, sleepy Italian villages where the old men wear suits and flat caps and sit under gazebos in the park playing cards. Where the laundry swings in the breeze from the balconies and the fruit vendors through drive the streets, shouting out their wares. It's like a fairy tale, a moment trapped in time. Italy has been praised for its romantic muse potential as early as Lord Byron's seven-year stay toward the beginning of the nineteenth century, and Italy remains the fifth most popular tourist location in the entire world. However, when you ask people, especially American people, which cities they visited on their last trip to Italy, you will always hear, “Rome, Florence, and Venice,” cities that seem to overflow with tourists, especially during the summer months. Often you will hear of other cities in the northern part of the country—Bologna, perhaps, or Milan, and occasionally as far south as Pompeii—but hardly ever will you hear of an American tourist visiting Sicily. What is so great about Sicily, anyway? And why don't we ever seem to make it down there?

Traveling south of Rome can get difficult. Sicily is a long way by car and too short a distance to really justify a plane ride, and the train rides are long and expensive. But “La Bella Sicilia” still awaits intrepid adventurers seeking a real Italian experience away from the popular tourist spots saturated with camera-toting box-checkers. For the particular adventure I have in mind, you'll first need to find your way to Messina, just a few minutes by ferry from the tip of Calabria, where our journey will begin. Once there, get a hold of a rental car or get a feel for the bus routes from someone you trust. However, if you go by bus, be sure you have a strong stomach.

Once you've crossed the ferry from the mainland to the island of Sicily, the pace of life will immediately slow, even though Messina, our first stop, has nearly 240,000 inhabitants. Take a stroll, and be sure to try some of the famous local pasticciere (pastry shops). Our next stop is Taormina, roughly an hour's drive outside of Messina, and still within the province. Taormina is one of Sicily's most famous tourist locations, and rightfully so. This picturesque town is filled with crumbling

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Comment [1]: This sounds like the breeze is coming from the balconies.

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Comment [2]: This bit doesn't work with the interjection as a whole.

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Comment [3]: Some geographical explanation might do you good here. I have no idea where these places are in relation to Sicily.

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buildings, fascinating ancient Greek ruins (among them is one of the best surviving Greek theaters), and unparalleled views of the impossibly blue Ionian sea from its cliff sides. Take a stroll, explore the markets, and unwind as you absorb the sunshine and festival atmosphere.

Another hour of road will bring us to Catania, which boasts just under 300,000 citizens, and clocks in as the second-largest city in Sicily. For a city of its size, it keeps a surprisingly calm overall feeling, especially considering that the town rests at the base of Etna, one of the most active volcanoes in the world. It's difficult to really feel like you're in a hurry in Catania. Be sure to hike mount Etna, if your schedule permits, and do not miss visiting the duomo di Catania (cathedral of Catania), one of the most beautiful churches in Sicily. From its piazza you can reach most of the downtown area's best tourist offerings on foot, including large markets that are open daily and that offer everything from fresh produce and fish to clothes and jewelry. The best gelato in town is found at Chocofusion, by the Lindt company, with a close second at C&G, Cioccolato e Gelato (Chocolate and gelato), who specialize in rich chocolate flavors. Be sure to try the "sette veli" (seven layers) at both places!

Another hour by car will bring you to the beginning of the southernmost tip of Sicily, a land filled with beautiful Baroque architecture and countless hidden treasures. The first stop among these cities is in Siracusa, or Syracuse. Founded roughly 2,700 years ago by ancient Greek Corinthians, Siracusa was the bustling center of the ancient world when Rome was still a hick town. In Siracusa's archaeological park, you'll find such fascinating treasures as the famous Greek theater, another of the best-surviving ancient Greek theaters, where Greek plays are still performed in June. It also boasts impressive Roman ruins, and a large, manmade cave called the "orecchio di Dionisio" (Ear of Dionysus), where even whispers can echo impressively. The treasure of Siracusa is the tiny island of Ortigia, reached by footbridge from the center of town. The first thing you'll see when you arrive is the ruined Temple of Apollo, and across from the temple at Café Apollo, you'll find delicious cannoli (sweet ricotta-filled fried pastry shells) and arancini (fried rice balls filled with meat sauce). A ten-minute walk by foot through some of the most charming, crumbling, cramped streets (they make for

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excellent pictures) will take you to the Piazza del Duomo (the square of the cathedral), one of the most beautiful piazzas in Italy. When the weather is warm, stop to enjoy a pizza in one of the small outdoor cafe's across from the duomo. The duomo in Siracusa is especially interesting because it was built on top of an ancient Greek temple, incorporating its foundation and pillars. If you make it all the way to the southern tip of the island of Ortigia, you'll find the Maniace castle, from which you can see beautiful views of the sea.

Once you've gotten your fill of Siracusa (take your time, and if you have enough of it, stop by PizzArt on Via Tica, the best pizzeria in town), try to drop by the natural reserve of the Cassibile river to see some of Sicily's natural beauties, like the Cavagrande Cassibile canyon, only about 45 minutes from Siracusa and not far from Avola Antica (Old Avola). Returning to the main road you will pass through Avola, the first of the small southern-Sicilian cities destroyed by the great earthquake of 1693, and rebuilt at the height of the Baroque period. Not far from Avola, down the same road, you will arrive in Noto, one of the loveliest stops on our journey. The quiet, sleepy town of Noto used to be inhabited by the Sicilian nobility, and continues to boast beautiful palaces and civic and religious buildings. The cathedral of Noto was recently renovated, and is one of the largest, loveliest religious buildings in Sicily. Not far from the cathedral, toward the end of May, the streets will be lined with brightly-colored, detailed flower-petal designs. It is difficult to find oneself in a hurry in Noto.

Just an hour after you leave Noto you'll arrive in Modica, one of my very favorite stops on this adventure. This small, hilly Sicilian town is famous throughout Italy for its chocolate. When the Spanish discovered chocolate in the new world and brought some to Italy, Modica adopted the practice of preparing chocolate by the old Aztec method and continues to employ it today. Between visiting the beautiful churches and strolling through the picturesque streets, be sure to enjoy this unique, gritty chocolate in all its various flavors, and if the weather's warm, stop for a granita al cioccolato di Modica (An Italian ice with Modica chocolate) at the small cafe among the chocolate shops.

Once you leave Modica, you're only about half an hour from the city of Ragusa, which you'll

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approach by way of its tiny sister-city, Ragusa-Ibla. Ragusa, thanks to that same devastating earthquake of 1693, is divided into upper Ragusa, the more cosmopolitan half, and lower Ragusa, or Ragusa-Ibla. It also boasts the best food in all Sicily, and the most unique local specialties. Your winding drive up the hillside to upper Ragusa will be entrancing, and don't worry about passing Ragusa-Ibla—you can visit it later on foot. Once you've parked downtown, you'll pass the lovely Baroque cathedral of Ragusa, right across from which, at Di Pasquale, you can find the best arancini in town, and the creamiest gelato. You can browse the shops along the main streets, Corso Italia and Via Roma. On Corso Italia, at the L'Arte Bianca panificio (bakery), you'll find one of the most interesting local specialties: la focaccia Ragusana or scaccia Ragusana, a creation with thin layers of bread wrapped around flavorful toppings like tomatoes, ricotta, and sausage. It's reminiscent of a hand-held lasagna, and might just be one of the best things you've ever had. On reaching Via Roma, cross the bridge over the gorge that divides the upper portion of the city in two. On the other side of the gorge, not far from the train station, you'll pass the panificio Puma (Puma bakery), where you will find the best pane al olive (bread with olives), pizza al taglio (pre-cooked and ready to cut), and cassata Ragusana (small, simple ricotta-filled pastries reminiscent of the famous Cassata Siciliana, or ricotta-filled iced sponge cake). If you're lucky enough to be there in the evening, head up the hill to via Mariannina Schinina, and ask around until you find a sandwich shop in a truck, called “Ziu Pinu” (Sicilian for “Uncle Joey”). These are some of the best panini (sandwiches) you will ever try. If you're feeling brave, tell Ziu Pinu “scelta sua” (your choice), and brace yourself.

From downtown Ragusa you can walk down to Ragusa-Ibla, winding down dozens of stairs and twisting, crumbling passageways covered with love graffiti. Ragusa-Ibla has over a hundred churches, an incredible feat for a village of its size. Its cathedral (dedicated to St. George) is one of the prettiest in Sicily. Near the duomo are famous gelaterie (gelato shops) and cafés. Be sure not to do your visiting between the hours of one and four—Ragusa-Ibla keeps a traditional schedule, and shops and churches close and lunch at home begins around one. A three-course meal followed by dessert and a long nap is

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the tradition still rigorously followed throughout Sicily, especially in small, sleepy towns like Ragusa-Ibla.

Hop in your car again, and this time, your trip will be longer. An hour and a half in the car will take you to Gela, where you can sample the tutù, the small, cake-like Sicilian pastries crusted with glaze. If you're brave, try some of the local specialty—lumache (snails). If you have time, visit some of the ancient Greek ruins in Gela, like the old city wall and museums. Another hour and a half in the car will take you to Agrigento, where you will forget the difference between Italy and Greece for a moment. The Valle dei Templi (The Valley of the Temples) is home to the best-preserved ancient Greek temple in the world, and to some of the most impressive Greek ruins. You won't want to miss this.

Sicily, as its sleepy, laid-back reputation will hint at, is best enjoyed at a leisurely pace. You won't need to stop in all of these cities in order to find that mysterious “it” factor that makes Italy such a popular place to visit. It could be the beautiful Mediterranean climate, or the tenacious traditions. It could be the laundry swinging in the breeze over Baroque wrought-iron balconies, or the food culture that causes the streets to empty entirely at midday to allow for big plates of pasta, meat, vegetables, fruit, and dessert. It could be the sun-dried tomatoes and olives still cured at home, or the young men sitting right next to the old men playing cards in the park, hinting that the quiet Sicilian way of life is here to stay. If you're looking for high adventure, busy people, and a cosmopolitan way of life, I would recommend London or New York. But if you're looking to slow down, enjoy life, eat some wonderful food, and be inspired: head down to Sicily. It's waiting for you.

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