



Castellammare del Golfo

Road trippin' across Sicily

A car, good company and a taste for adventure are all you need to uncover this wild, raw island at the foot of Italy. By Kate McAuley

It's fair to say Sicily and I got off on the wrong foot. The Mediterranean island, located off the toe of Italy's proverbial boot, was the birthplace of Christina, my best friend in high school. Like all BFFs at that age, we spent a lot of time at each other's houses. At mine, we listened to Madonna, swam in our pool and mercilessly teased my younger sister, while at hers we devoured large plates of spaghetti, tried on her mother's Italian designer clothes and listened to her father Michele wax lyrical on the old country.

Michele spoke longingly of the deep blue sea and the flavoursome tomatoes you can only get in Italy. He described the small seaside village that he grew up in so colourfully that I felt as though I'd visited



it already. And, with classic films such as *Cinema Paradiso* and *Il Postino*, he instilled in me a love of Italian cinema that I carry to this day. My 16-year-old Australian body felt as though it had an Italian soul, so I was devastated when Sicily stole my adopted family back to its sun-dappled shores.

More years than I care to acknowledge have passed since then, and I think it's about time the island made it up to me. Convincing three girlfriends to come on an early autumn road trip that would feature lots of beach time, warm weather, intriguing historical sites and all the seafood pasta you could eat proved to be a simple task, which is why in late September we found ourselves hurtling down the highway from Palermo's airport towards Castellammare del Golfo, a tiny fishing village on Sicily's north-west coast.

We had made the difficult decision to save a visit to Palermo — the Sicilian capital known for its Byzantine mosaics, Baroque architecture and shabby-chic streets — for another trip. It had been a long, busy year and we wanted to begin our break with something calmer than the hustle and bustle of one of Italy's most notoriously animated towns. We arrive at our first destination not long after sunset and head straight to the small row of restaurants that border the port.

Sicilian cuisine is one of the main reasons people flock to these shores. Spectacular local produce matched with a culinary repertoire that reflects the island's diverse history has resulted in myriad flavour combinations — all of which have been honed across the centuries to create something altogether unique and nothing less than exceptional.

For our first meal I choose a steaming

plate of *spaghetti alla vongole* (spaghetti with clams), fragrant with garlic, white wine, chilli, olive oil and parsley, while my friends tuck into *busiate alla norma* — a traditional Sicilian speciality made with eggplants and hand-rolled corkscrew curls of pasta that hail from the nearby town of Trapani — couscous with raisins and saffron and a risotto thick with *frutti di mare* (seafood). It's simple food packed with flavour, which also provides a sensory tableau of Sicily's mottled history. The ancient Greeks, for example, spoke of the island's seafood, shellfish, fruit and vegetables, while the Saracens (Arabs) of the 9th century brought with them eggplant, spices, citrus fruit, pistachios and almonds.

The following morning we leave behind the colourful boats bobbing in the aquamarine harbour and head west. We're on our way to San Vito Lo Capo — a place that a local has told us has the best beach in the world. We take our time (Italian drivers unfortunately do live up to their reckless stereotype), stopping at lookouts to marvel at the coastline and taking the back roads where possible. Against a soundtrack that includes Alt-J, Robbie Williams and arias from Wagner's *Ring Cycle*, we pass centuries-old stone farmhouses, small quarries that pockmark the rolling hills with pure white gashes and the odd eucalyptus tree.

Just as we begin to tire of our playlist, we're confronted with a sheer cliff reminiscent of the lofty peaks that border Rio's famous Ipanema Beach. As we edge closer, a strip of yellow sand comes into view, peppered with locals flying kites, swimming and soaking up the final rays of the late summer sunshine. Hawkers pick their way through the small crowd, selling



^ Spaghetti alla vongole



< Chocolate-covered cannoli



Sicily's countryside

The beach at San Vito Lo Capo

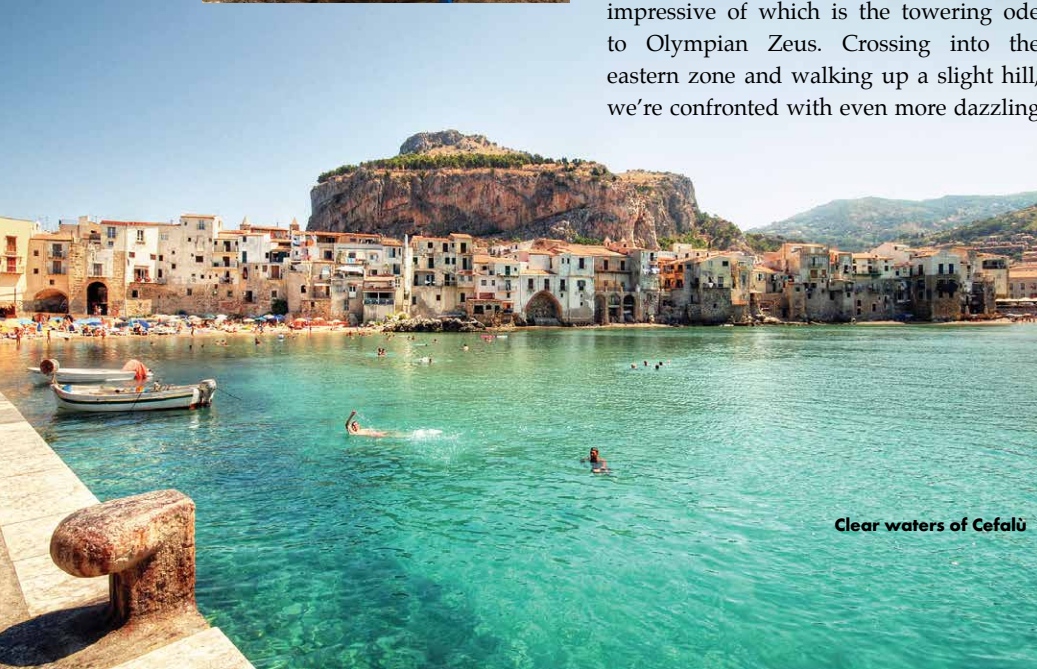




^ The Greek Theatre of Taormina



< The Turkish Staircase



Clear waters of Cefalù

hats, cold drinks, cheap jewellery and massages. There are deckchairs, loungers and umbrellas to rent for a few Euros each, but we slap down our towels, strip off to our suits and sprint into the sea.

It may not be the best beach in the world, but it's certainly up there as one of my favourites. The temperature is cool enough to be refreshing, but warm enough to be comfortable. The water is clear and there's just enough of a swell to lift us off our feet before returning us gently to the sea floor. The sky is cloudless and the breeze is balmy. A few hours later, sun-kissed and deliciously flaky with salt and sand, we pile back into the car to head to Agrigento, on the south coast.

The city itself is famous not for its centre, but the pearls on its periphery. We stay in a hotel on the outskirts and get up early the next morning to visit the **Valle dei Templi** (Valley of the Temples). Given that modern-day Sicily is very much part of Italy, you'd be forgiven for thinking these ancient ruins were left behind by the Romans. It was the Greeks in the 5th century BC who began erecting the temples that still preside over the hills below.

We get our first view from the road — dusty pink and ochre yellow columns rising up in reverence to a clutch of ancient deities. We start our walking tour at the lower western edge of the site, following a well-maintained wooden footpath, flanked by almond and olive trees and carved boulders that would've once been part of the ancient buildings.

In silence, we branch off, making our way past temples and altars, the most impressive of which is the towering ode to Olympian Zeus. Crossing into the eastern zone and walking up a slight hill, we're confronted with even more dazzling

structures, including the **Tempio di Giunone** and the **Tempio della Concordia** (Temples of Juno and Concord respectively).

Gathering at the top, we take a moment to appreciate the impressive view, turning our backs on the messy Agrigento skyline and instead gazing south, across the vast expanse of the Mediterranean Sea. Not wanting to leave the magic behind just yet, we take a late lunch at **Kokalos**. With an uninterrupted vista of temples and a menu that introduces us to pistachio-based pasta sauces, this restaurant is a must-visit.

Before heading away from the sea, we backtrack slightly, again on local advice. The sign pointing to the **Scala dei Turchi** (Turkish Staircase) is hand-painted and weather-beaten, contradicting the natural beauty that lies ahead. A short walk around the point reveals a stark promontory of white rock tipping from the coast into the sea. We join a small crowd of people on the chalky slopes where the weather-worn curves of these so-called 'steps' (it's a natural phenomenon that belies its name) surprisingly conform to our own.

It's the swim from here, however, that makes this a place worth remembering. We follow the locals' lead and cross a convenient platform (another generous gift from Mother Nature) at the base of the escarpment and dive into the ocean, forcing the quietest girl of our group to exclaim at the top of her lungs "THIS IS ABSOLUTELY GORGEOUS!" Her voice reverberates across the bay, audible from the far side of the shore — we know because we have our lunch on the beach and a waiter asks us if we'd heard the commotion.

As we leave, the sun worshippers beside us giggle and yell out, "Where are you going? You can't miss the sunset." This is another experience we'll have to keep in mind for our next visit. For now, we leave the coast behind for a taste of the Baroque.

The hairpin bends steal us away from the sea, and as we climb, the hills bare all. Trees struggle to grow and the colours out the window change from deep blue to earthy terracotta and grey. The medieval town of Modica is where we begin. In modern terms we're not that far from the water, but the hilly surrounds would've made it relatively inaccessible before the advent of motorised transport, giving the town a very different vibe. Although the

Sicily in style

Sicily is not usually thought of as a luxury destination, but there are a growing number of gem hotels for those looking for something plush.



Situated among vineyards in the Agrigento region, **PLANETA ESTATE — LA FORESTERIA** (planetaestate.it) offers lessons on local wine and cooking classes.



History buffs shouldn't look further than the **VILLA ATHENA** (hotelvillaathena.it) for its unrivalled views of the ancient Greek ruins in the Valle dei Templi.



The **VERDURA RESORT** (roccoforthotels.com) is perfect for anyone looking to be pampered. It boasts a private Mediterranean beachfront and a world-class spa.

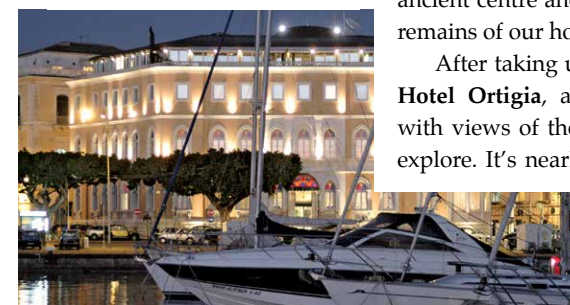


Design fiends will love **CASA TALIA** (casatalia.it). The boutique hotel has a new interior designed by Milanese architects (and owners) Marco Giunta and Viviana Haddad.



In Syracuse, a stay in the Old City, Ortigia, is a must. The **GRAND HOTEL ORTIGIA** (grandhotelortigia.it) sits within its opulent surrounds and is within walking distance of the major attractions.

> Grand Hotel Ortigia



> A Baroque church in Modica

Greeks and Romans both inhabited Modica, it was during the 14th century — when the city was controlled by the powerful Chiaramonte family — that it became one of Italy's power players; this history still informs both its architecture and taste buds.

We drop our bags at **Palazzo II Cavaliere**, a B&B that was once a palace and now houses well-appointed guest rooms and a breakfast room with a view of the **Chiesa di San Giorgio** — a stunning Baroque church that stands on the hill opposite. Eager to stretch our legs, we climb the 250 steps for closer inspection. The interior is impressive, but it's Modica's topsy-turvy alley ways, well-trodden staircases and corner coffee shops that call for our attention. It's the same feeling we get when we visit the nearby towns of Ragusa and Noto. There is a sense of history in these well lived-in places and getting lost in the tangle of streets is almost as important as visiting the sites and sampling the food.

But eat we must. Traditional cooking here is best tasted at **Osteria dei Sapori Perduti** in Modica. The name literally means the 'restaurant of lost flavours'. Seafood is available, but in a town that boasts more butchers than fishmongers, we happily order hearty stews of wild boar, rabbit and lamb bolstered by lentils, handmade pasta, beans and carrots.

Our final stop is perhaps the jewel in Sicily's crown. Located on the south-east coast, we find the city of Syracuse following a drive through groves of almond, olive and lemon trees heavy with fruit. We pass Greek ruins and head to Ortigia — an island that also serves as the city's ancient centre and our new home for what remains of our holiday.

After taking up residence at the **Grand Hotel Ortigia**, a stunning five-star hotel with views of the marina, we head out to explore. It's nearly sunset as we approach

the **Piazza del Duomo**. The church, which is the centre point of the square, is a mish-mash of architectural styles that began as an ancient Greek temple to the goddess Athena, the Doric columns of which can be seen from outside the church.

The next day, we're treated to cries of "Food is for eating not for looking" and "How you from?" The traders at the **Antico Mercato** (ancient market) tease us from their stalls as we jostle with *nonnas* doing their daily shop. We watch as fishermen expertly knife open sea urchins and gut anchovies with nothing more than a sharp thumbnail. The tomatoes and aubergines are dark red and purple orbs, the lemons are a disconcerting lime green. We dream of moving here, our remaining days happily replete with sea-salted capers, fragrant olive oil, purplish garlic bulbs and octopus freshly dragged from the ocean floor.

Not everything about Ortigia is old, however. There is a groundswell of creative types looking to stake their own claim on the city. **MOON** (Move Ortigia Out of Normality) is an interesting enterprise that incubates young artists and puts on several events a week, which can be anything from live music to poetry readings, as long as the performers are local. Other youthful hangouts include **Pub Vecchio**. Ironically it means 'old pub', but it's here that we spend our last night surrounded by students, listening to jazz and reminiscing on what a magical week it's been.

As we are heading to Catania airport, I get a belated email from my school friend Christina with recommendations of where to visit. She's since moved back to Australia, but said the stunning seaside towns of Cefalù and Taormina are both must-sees and a trip to Mount Etna shouldn't be missed. All worthy places that I'll have to add to my growing list for when I return. Sicily and I are now, after all, the firmest of friends. □