



Sicily

HIGHLIGHTS

- Viewing the smoking gun of **Mt Etna** (p269) from various angles on the long march through its western foothills
- Peering into the abyss of the **Grotta del Gelo** (p276), a lava-sculpted ice cave that retains ice year-round on Etna's northern slopes
- Looking out at the Aeolian Islands from the rim of Vulcano's gently steaming **Gran Cratere** (p279)
- Staying overnight in an old hunting lodge, surrounded by age-old beech woods on the **Nebrodi Lake Circuit** (p281)

Signature food: *Pasta con le sarde*

Celebrated native: Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (novelist)

Famous for... Volcanoes

Images of Sicily loom large on any Mediterranean horizon, beckoning modern travellers like they once lured Greek warriors and trade-hungry Phoenicians. There's fiery Mt Etna and temperamental Stromboli; ripe red tomatoes and salty, green olives; Troisi in *Il Postino* and Pacino in *The Godfather*; Papa in the piazza and Mamma on a Vespa. One image you curiously won't see is that of people hiking. Sicily isn't exactly over-endowed with weekend rambling associations. Aside from the arid tramp up Mt Etna – generally done with the aid of jeeps and a cable car – the walking culture here usually begins and ends with a short (yet sweet) stroll to the gelateria.

Protected in a handful of fledgling regional parks – including the omnipresent Parco dell'Etna – lightly trafficked paths do exist, even if legible signposts don't, and negotiating them is a perfect under-the-radar way of discovering the little-heralded 'island within an island' that is inland Sicily.

Despite its semi-autonomous regional status and unique Greek, Arabic and Norman history, Sicily has long stood for everything that is quintessential about Italy. What is arguably the nation's greatest novel (*Il Gattopardo*) was set and written here, while Sicily's exquisite yet earthy food is conceived, concocted and served out of what gastronomes reverently refer to as 'God's Kitchen'.

Two hikes cover the greener and quieter slopes of Sicily's insomniac volcano, while a third tackles the less menacing terrain of Vulcano in the Aeolian Islands to the north. A wild card is the 18km stroll through the Parco dei Nebrodi, a strangely un-Sicilian melange of ancient beech woods and pastoral lakes that shimmer like dislodged vistas from a sepia-toned northern postcard.



HISTORY

Paying a sometimes heavy price for its strategic location in the heart of the Mediterranean, Sicily has, since prehistory, been an attractive territorial prize, bringing a succession of colonisers and settlers to its shores. It is believed the earliest settlers were the Sicanians, Elymians and Siculians, arriving from various points around the southern Mediterranean. They were later followed by the Phoenicians. Greek colonisation began in the 8th century BC with the foundation of Naxos. By 210 BC Sicily was under Roman control, with power eventually passing to the Byzantines and then to the Arabs, who had settled in by AD 903.

Norman conquest of the island began in 1060, when Roger I of Hauteville captured Messina. Mastery of Sicily subsequently passed to the Swabians and the Holy Roman Emperor Frederick II, known as Stupor Mundi (Wonder of the World). In the 13th century the French Angevins provided a period of misrule that ended in 1282 with the revolt known as the Sicilian Vespers. The island was ceded to the Spanish Aragón family and, in 1503, to the Spanish crown. After short periods of Savoy and Austrian rule in

the 18th century, Sicily again came under the control of the Spanish Bourbons of Naples in 1734, who united the island with southern Italy in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

On 11 May 1860 Giuseppe Garibaldi landed at Marsala with his 'one thousand' and began the conquest that set the seal on unification. Life did not greatly improve on Sicily, and between 1871 and 1914 more than one million Sicilians emigrated, mainly to the US.

In 1943 some 140,000 Allied troops, under General Dwight Eisenhower, landed on southeastern Sicily. Initially blocked by dogged Italian and German resistance, Eisenhower's field commanders entered Messina within six weeks, after heavy fighting had devastated many parts of the island. The Allied occupation lasted until early 1944. In 1948 Sicily became a semi-autonomous region and, unlike other such regions in Italy, it has its own parliament and legislative powers.

ENVIRONMENT

Extending over 25,708 sq km, triangular-shaped Sicily is the largest island in the Mediterranean. Physically the largely