

Sicily



More of a sugar-spiked espresso than a milky cappuccino, Sicily will reward you with an intense bittersweet experience rather than anything lightweight and frothy. In Sicily it seems as though the sun shines brighter, the shadows are darker, and life is lived full-on and for the moment. Overloaded with art treasures, undersupplied with infrastructure and continuously struggling to thwart Mafia-driven corruption, Sicily possesses some baffling social topography. Brace yourself to reconcile architectural beauty with modern squalor, artistic excellence with moral ambivalence and the rational with the sensual. This is an island to be visited with an open mind – and a healthy appetite; one factor remains a constant, and that is the uncompromisingly high quality of the cuisine.

After some 25 centuries of foreign domination, Sicilians are heirs to an impressive cultural legacy, from the refined architecture of Magna Graecia to a beguiling, if contradictory, artistic fusion of Arab craftsmanship and Norman austerity. This complexity of culture is matched by a startling diversity of landscape that includes bucolic rolling countryside, a smouldering Mt Etna, kilometres of aquamarine coastline and a tiara of island gems.

Today, Sicily's new generation is loathe to remain trapped in the past. New ventures are seeing aristocratic entrepreneurs prising open the doors of some of Europe's finest *palazzi* and villas, while sensitive *agriturismi* (farm-stay accommodation) are shedding light on Sicily's hidden rural treasures and national parks. Sicily also has a refreshing lack of neon-blazing entertainment and theme parks, which further helps preserve its individuality and appeal.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Bargain with the fish vendors at dawn, climb Europe's most active volcano in the afternoon and enjoy Sicily's best nightlife in constantly buzzing **Catania** (p793).
- Soak up the sun and hike to your heart's content as you island-hop across the seven stunningly beautiful **Aeolian Islands** (p778)
- Marvel at the majesty of **Segesta** (p829), whose perfectly preserved Greek temple sits in splendid isolation on a windswept hillside
- Shop till you drop in **Taormina** (p789), or ply the limpid waters in the sparkling coves below
- Test the legendary acoustics of Dionysius' Ear, then settle in for an evening of classical drama at the fabled Greek amphitheatre in **Syracuse** (p808)
- Get that end-of-the-earth feeling amid the black volcanic cliffs, domed *dammusi* and brilliant blue waters of **Pantelleria** (p831).



■ POPULATION: 5 MILLION

■ AREA: 25,708 SQ KM

History

Sicily's list of invaders features all the usual suspects: Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Byzantines, Spaniards and, more surprisingly, the Normans with their delightful Monty Python-style names (King Roger, William the Bad, Walter the Archbishop...).

The island's most deeply ingrained cultural influences, however, originate from its first inhabitants – the Sicani from North Africa, the Siculi from Latium (Italy) and the Elymni from Greece in the south. The subsequent colonisation of the island by the Carthaginians (also from North Africa) and the Greeks, in the 8th and 6th centuries BC respectively, compounded this cultural divide through decades of war when powerful opposing cities, such as Palermo and Catania, struggled to dominate the island.

Although inevitably part of the Roman Empire, it was not until the Arab invasions of AD 831 that Sicily truly came into its own. Trade, farming and mining were all fostered under Arab influence and Sicily soon became an enviable prize for European opportunists. The Normans, desperate for a piece of the pie, invaded in 1061 and made Palermo the centre of their expanding empire and the finest city in the Mediterranean.

Impressed by the cultured Arab lifestyle, King Roger squandered vast sums on ostentatious palaces and churches and encouraged a hedonistic atmosphere in his court. But such prosperity – and decadence (Roger's grandson, William II, even had a harem) – inevitably gave rise to envy and resentment and, after 400 years of pleasure and profit, the Norman line was extinguished and the kingdom passed to the austere German House of Hohenstaufen with little opposition from the seriously eroded and weakened Norman occupation. In the centuries that followed, Sicily passed to the Holy Roman Emperors, Angevins (French), Aragonese (Spanish) and Austrians in a turmoil of rebellion and revolution that continued until the Spanish Bourbons united Sicily with Naples in 1734 as the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Little more than a century later, on 11 May 1860, Giuseppe Garibaldi planned his daring and dramatic unification of Italy from Marsala.

Reeling from this catalogue of colonisers, Sicilians struggled in poverty-stricken conditions. Unified with Italy, but no better off,

nearly one million men and women emigrated to the USA between 1871 and 1914 before the outbreak of WWI.

Ironically, the Allies (seeking Mafia help in America for the reinvasion of Italy) helped in establishing the Mafia's stranglehold on Sicily. In the absence of suitable administrators, they invited the undesirable *mafiosi* Don Calògero Vizzini to do the job. When Sicily became a semi-autonomous region in 1948, Mafia control extended right to the heart of politics and the country plunged into a 50-year silent civil war. It only started to emerge from this after the anti-Mafia maxi-trials of the 1990s, which led to important prosecutions against members of the massive heroin and cocaine network between Palermo and New York, known as the 'pizza connection'.

Today most Sicilians continue to be less than enthralled by an organisation that continues to grow rich on money from the illegal drugs trade, human trafficking and – that old, ubiquitous cash-flow booster – extortion and protection which, experts say, many businesses in Sicily still pay. At least the thuggery and violence of the 1980s has diminished and there have been some important arrests (see boxed text, p761). The 2008 conviction of Sicilian governor Salvatore Cuffaro based on his alleged ties to Cosa Nostra (an unimaginable scenario in years past) has also served to encourage those who would speak out against Mafia influence.

Dangers & Annoyances

Although it's unlikely that you'll be subjected to a Mafia shoot-out at your favourite pizzeria, there *is* petty crime here, particularly in Palermo, with pickpockets and bag-snatchers most notably in the marketplaces. Car theft is also a problem in the city, so use private, guarded car parks if possible.

Getting There & Away

AIR

An increasing number of airlines fly direct to Sicily – although most still require a transfer in Rome or Milan. **Alitalia** (www.alitalia.com) is the main carrier. See **p772** and **p890** for further details.

BOAT

Regular car and passenger ferries cross the strait between Villa San Giovanni (Calabria) and Messina. Hydrofoils connect Messina with