

Understand Sicily

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Europe's economic crisis and an upsurge in immigration have created new challenges for Sicily.

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Sicily's history is as epic as it comes. Our summary will help you to understand the island's complex multicultural heritage.

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Sample the street snacks, seafood and sweet treats that are the hallmarks of Sicily's addictively delicious cuisine.

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Defining themselves as Sicilian first, Italian second, the locals are characterised by their devotion to family, tradition and religious ritual.

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Settle into some serious pre-trip research by immersing yourself in Sicily's darkly dramatic body of literature and films.

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Long the dominating force in Sicilian life, the Mafia's grip has begun to loosen in recent years.

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Sicily's staggering collection of aesthetic treasures spans more than 10 millennia, from prehistoric cave paintings to art nouveau.

Sicily Today

These are tough times for Sicily. The same economic woes that have crippled Italy's Mediterranean neighbours in recent years are now hitting southern Italy with full force. While there are some hopeful signs – community groups continue to chip away at the Mafia's influence in Sicilian society, and the 2012 election of anti-Mafia politicians Rosario Crocetta and Leoluca Orlando has been widely well-received – the next couple of years will likely be challenging, as Sicilians struggle to regain their economic bearings.

Best on Film

Nuovo Cinema Paradiso (Cinema Paradiso, 1988) Semi-autobiographical tale of small-town life from Sicilian director Giuseppe Tornatore.

Il Postino (The Postman, 1994) On the gorgeous island of Salina, Pablo Neruda philosophises with a humble Sicilian postman.

Stromboli, Terra di Dio (Stromboli, Land of God, 1950) Bergman and Rossellini's explosive tale of romance, with Stromboli's volcanic fireworks as a backdrop.

Best in Print

The Leopard (Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, 1958) Sicily's greatest novel, examining the Risorgimento's impact on Sicilian culture through the eyes of an ageing aristocrat.

Seeking Sicily (John Keahey, 2011) Engaging Sicilian travelogue, touching on many aspects of the island's culture and history, by a veteran American journalist.

Midnight in Sicily (Peter Robb, 1996) Disturbing but fascinating portrait of postwar Sicily, from an Australian expatriate living in Naples.

La Crisi

As of mid-2013, it's hard to go anywhere in Sicily without hearing about *la crisi* (the crisis), shorthand for the severe financial downturn currently affecting Italy. While recent economic conditions have not been great anywhere in Italy, the impact of the crisis has been especially devastating to Sicily and its southern Italian neighbours. Sicilian unemployment for the first quarter of 2013 was over 20%, compared to 12% nationally. Meanwhile, youth employment had surged to 52%, leaving Sicily second only to Calabria among Italian regions and creating hand-wringing responses in even the most sanguine of observers. This is a frightening day-to-day reality for Sicilians, particularly those aged between 16 and 25.

Fuelling these bad numbers in part was Fiat's December 2011 closure of its factory in Termini Imerese, just east of Palermo, after 41 years in business – a move that deprived over 2000 local residents of steady manufacturing jobs. Other noteworthy casualties of the economic downturn include Palermo's venerable Flaccovio bookstore, Guadagna shopping centre and Grande Mig-liore department store.

The crisis is also having a serious impact on the tourism sector. Ask hoteliers and they'll tell you that visitor numbers are down, both among foreign and domestic travellers. Even the Italians who are still travelling are cutting back on their spending, with the result that prices for tourist basics such as restaurant meals and accommodation have had to be frozen at 2011 levels due to lack of demand. While lower costs may be a welcome surprise for foreign visitors, they're bad news for Sicilians who depend on tourist dollars to pay the bills. A sobering reminder of the grim toll these numbers were taking were the suicides of two hotel owners on the Aeolian Islands in the days surrounding Easter 2013, driven in part by feelings of financial desperation.