



COASTAL SYRACUSE



BAROQUE RAGUSA

SICILY TURNS IT UP TO ELEVEN

What makes Sicily so Sicilian? Is it the intense vibe, the 130-kilometre-per-hour speed limit or the most explosive volcano in Europe? The region at the tip of Italy's 'boot' is made for kicks.

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Repat adventures in Italy have given me insights into 'the Italian way'. But on my first trip to Sicily – a two-week circumnavigation of the island, armed with an Italian-speaking GPS – it's immediately clear Italy's southernmost region turns it up to 11. Everything is louder, more pronounced, more in-your-face. Besides the intense vibe, an overabundance of prickly pears and *Godfather* souvenirs, what else makes Sicily so Sicilian?

1. THEY DO THE PASSEGGIATA

The *Passeggiata* is to Italians what Vegemite is to Australians: you're born doing it. The best place in Sicily to observe the phenomenon of evening promenading is Trapani. Night after night the locals trot out plenty of attitude – but never the same outfit twice – while doing multiple laps of the same streets without actually going anywhere. Go figure.

2. THERE'S A BEACH SCENE

La spiaggia (the beach) is broadly defined as a patch of pebbles or a stretch of sand. Nothing compares with the surreal, glaring white cliffs of the stunning Scala dei Turchi on the south coast. However, arguably the best white-sand beach resort is Cefalu, in the north, where overbaked, leather-skinned nonnas flaunt their life experience in teeny bikinis. Beware.

3. THERE'S OTHER GREAT OLD STUFF

Some old stuff in Sicily is really new stuff that just looks like old stuff. Call it rustic if you're a romantic, or run-down if you're a realist. It's all Greek to me. Yes, the really old stuff is.

The Greek colony of Akragas (now Agrigento) was one of the greatest cities of the ancient Mediterranean world. Today, walk the talk in the Valley of the Temples, a monumental row of temples flanked by century-old olive groves.

At the archaeological museum on Lipari check out the first 'situation comedy' character types represented by terracotta masks from the Aeolian island's classical Greek heyday. "Lines on the forehead signify a reflective, meditative character; their absence, an empty-headed person," says the sign explaining the Athenian New Comedy masks that predate the Golden Age of Botox.

4. THEY DRIVE LIKE THEY'RE IN THE TARGA FLORIO RALLY

The train system in Sicily is patchy, so get behind the wheel and strap yourself in for an interesting ride. Here's how to navigate the road rules like a local:

- If the scenery looks blurry, it's because the standard speed limit on the *autostrade* (highways) is 130 kilometres per hour.
- Why waste time driving around the mountain when you can drive straight >>



FAST FACT

In ancient Rome (and Greece), the clean marble statues we know today were painted in bold colours.



CASTELLAMMARE DEL GOLFO

ITALY BUCKET LIST

WATCH THE RACE THAT STOPS SIENA

On July 2 and August 16 the Piazza del Campo in Siena is lined with mattresses and filled with sand to form the track for the Palio horserace. Avoid the crush and book your accommodation early. ilpalio.org

KAYAK ON THE CANALS

Explore Venice under your own steam on a guided kayak tour in and around the city, including evening paddles along the Grand Canal or lagoon tours to Burano and Torcello islands. venicekayak.com

SEE A TRAVELLING MUSEUM

From May 15–18, 2014, ogle the Italian vintage cars vying for attention in the Mille Miglia, the historical 1000-mile car race from Brescia to Rome and back. 1000miglia.it

PRANCE AROUND IN A FERRARI

Get behind the wheel of a new Ferrari on a self-driving tour of Italy's most picturesque regions, living the sweet life in luxury hotels. red-travel.com

WHEN IN ROME DRINK CRAFT BEER

Craft beer is making a scene in the land of wine. On a private or small-group craft beer tour in Rome, learn why Italian microbrew is 'microbirrific'. vinicultural tours.com

through it? Impatience being the mother of invention, the tunnels along the *autostrade* are a feat of Sicilian engineering.

- Traffic lights will slow you down. They are just a suggestion. Who does a traffic light think it is, trying to dictate to you? Pah!
- If a parking spot (designated or otherwise) isn't big enough, it's not a problem. Stick your nose into the space and park on a perpendicular angle to the adjacent cars. Shrug your shoulders and utter "Eh" as you walk away. If your car isn't dented or scratched, you're not doing it properly.

5. THEY SPEAK WITH THEIR HANDS

This can be useful if you don't have the language. However, mention disgraced former Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi to your chatty taxi driver while on the *autostrada* and hands-free takes on a whole new meaning. But at least you won't need air-con – he'll be waving so wildly he'll become a mobile in-car fan. Don't wince at near misses.

6. IT'S AN ISLAND ...

Fish swim around it, which means fresh seafood in anyone's language. Except for the frozen shrimp (Eh). Il Saraceno Ristorante in

Cefalu does a delicious authentic spaghetti with clams and mussels. Reserve a table on the *terrazza sul mare* – a timber deck extending over the rocks to the ocean – at sunset and down an ice-cold Birra Messina (a Sicilian beer) while the fireball-red sun disappears behind the Tyrrhenian Sea.

It would be un-Sicilian not to sample a dish featuring *pesce spada* (swordfish). Better still if you catch your own on a fishing charter leaving from Favignana, the largest island of the Egadi archipelago, off the coast from Trapani.

You don't want to "sleep with the fishes" in Sicily, but hiring scuba diving gear is your ticket to an underworld that's teeming with marine life, some living among submerged Roman columns and amphoras.

Accessible from Palermo, the tiny island of Ustica has a big reputation as the home of Italian diving; red gorgonians, rainbow-coloured ornate wrasse, lobsters, spiny scorpion fish, barracudas, brilliant parrot fish and huge groupers and amberjacks thrive here in Italy's first marine reserve. On the mainland, Taormina is where you can infiltrate the underwater cave hide-outs of those elusive fresh shrimp. »



BARRACUDA OFF USTICA

PIAZZA ARCHIMEDE, SYRACUSE



TAORMINA'S TEATRO GRECO



7. IT'S ALWAYS READY TO RUMBLE

Sure, you can watch the volcanic island of Stromboli put on a spectacular fireworks display from the safety of a boat at sundown. But why not get close to the action by hiking to the summit craters of Europe's largest active volcano, Mount Etna? Choose from guided excursions that approach the summit from the northern or southern slopes. In winter ski on the volcano.

8. IT'S A CELEBRITY HOTSPOT

Celebrity-spotting is a summer sport in Taormina during the annual concert series at the spectacularly sited Teatro Greco (ancient Greek theatre). The venue attracts international performers (Patti Smith and Mark Knopfler last year) and hosts Taormina's film festival.

A regular visitor to Sicily's poshest town is Simple Minds frontman Jim Kerr, who owns

the hotel Villa Angela. (Yes, you can stay there, get an eyeful of Mount Etna and maybe rub shoulders with a rocker.) We spot Kerr's ex, Patsy Kensit, and her two sons (by Kerr and Liam 'Are you right?' Gallagher) having lunch at the next table at a shady *trattoria* off the tourist beat. She's in good company: the restaurant's brag wall of diners features Robert De Niro ('Vito Corleone' in *The Godfather II*), Franco Zeffirelli, Antonio Banderas, Michael Douglas and John Malkovich.

"The clams were amazing!" Patsy gushes to the nonna in charge, who responds by holding the English actor in an affectionate headlock between a hirsute armpit and a grandmotherly bosom.

Sure, Sicily can sometimes feel like hard work, but if you embrace her, she'll hug you back. What's not to love about that? **R**

THE LOWDOWN

STAY

Sea Palace, Cefalu
cefaluseapalace.it

La Finestra Sulla
Valle B&B, Agrigento
lafinestrasullavalle.com

Meridiana Hotel, Taormina
meridianahoteltaormina.com

Villa Angela, Taormina
hotelvillaangela.com

EAT

Il Saraceno Ristorante,
Cefalu, Via Carlo Ortolani
di Bordonaro, 50
+39 0921 922463

L'Osteria L'Ambasciata
di Sicilia, Agrigento
[ristorantelambasciata
disicilia.it](http://ristorantelambasciata
disicilia.it)

La Tavernetta, Taormina
latavernettataormina.it

La Botte Trattoria,
Taormina
labotte1972.it

DO

Valley of the Temples,
Agrigento
valleyofthetemples.com

Fishing charter,
Egadi islands
charterdipesca.com

Scuba diving
Find PADI-certified
centres in Sicily at
padi.com/scuba

Hike to Mount Etna
summit craters:
North: guidetnanord.com
South: funiviaetna.com

Summer rock concerts,
Taormina
teatrogrecotaormina.com

60th Taormina Film Fest
June 14–21, 2014
taorminafilmfest.it