

TRAVEL

Sicily Hot List

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There's something extra fab about Sicily. Everything is just that bit hotter (or cooler), more beautiful, and more intense. As Vogue editor Alexandra Shulman has written, 'Oranges are more orange in Sicily.' Whichever way you look at it, this once-prosperous island, the biggest in the Med and the meeting point between East and West, Africa and Europe, is magical. Go for its global class gastronomy that knocks the socks off almost anything you've eaten before. Tip up for its beautiful beaches. Go to marvel at its Byzantine, Baroque and Corinthian architecture and cliff-top villages. And to chill in stylish and super romantic hotels and villas. Here Caroline Phillips offers a guide to the best of the best....

1) Monaci delle Terra Nere (main image) is set blissfully in a 40-acre private estate that's being planted with squillions of fruit trees – from organic vineyards to orange and olive groves. Fabulously, it has Mount Etna puffing throatily behind it and the Med sparkling alluringly in the foreground. The hotel is in a 19th century dusty-pink villa – a former nobleman's house with a billiards room, library and suites – plus bedrooms in farm buildings scattered around the estate. As for the décor, Ada Calabrese has created romantic, stylish, eclectic interiors that combine metal staircases and contemporary artisan pieces with rustic walls of volcanic rock, original frescoed villa ceilings and antique palmento presses formerly used for crushing grapes. Additionally there's an *al fresco* bar and black lava-stone framed infinity pool carved under the shade of olive trees. You eat breakfast on a terrace cut into the foothills of Mount Etna, with pine needles for a carpet. And savour dinner on an original terracotta-tiled balcony overlooking the twinkling lights of Catania. They offer 'slow food' – authentic, organic Sicilian cuisine with zero miles, cooked slowly, and eaten even more slowly. All served by ever-solicitous staff decked with perma smiles. Owner, Guido Coffa, deserves full marks and more for style, soul and enthusiasm. This haven provides a welcome and romantic escape from the overwhelming summer heat, bustle and energy of Sicily....before you set off again for the magic of cliff-top villages, Byzantine, Baroque and Corinthian architecture, beautiful beaches, wine roads and more incredible food.

Website: www.monacidelletterenere.it Phone: +39 331 136 5016, Car hire: www.sbc.it or email: sbc@sb.it.



2) Gordon Ramsay cried when the Michelin stars were stripped from his New York restaurant. "It was," he said, "like losing a girlfriend." No such fate has befallen the one -Michelin-starred eaterie, La Gazza Ladra in Modica, despite a change of chef in 2013. Indeed the new grandi formaggi, David Tamburini, was born in the same town as Leonardo da Vinci – and, regarding matters culinary, shares a little of the Renaissance polymath's artistic brilliance. He conjures up refined, delicate Sicilian and other Italian cuisine – a modern and inventive take on traditional, dishes – that looks too good to eat. And he wows with tastes, smells, colours and shapes. From the delicate chick pea and sesame crisp-breads atop twigs, like flowers in a vase – to amuse-bouches of potato skin 'nests' of foodie foam and octopus salad. From veal carpaccio rolled into little 'logs'.

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scattered with truffle 'leaves' – to a crispy choux pastry and carob and Modica rich chocolate pudding which looks like pods plucked from the forest. The service is attentive, knowledgeable and welcoming. As for wine, the cellar boasts more than 800 labels – they're known for their pairing – with the focus on regional excellence. The restaurant's inside the baroque Palazzo Failla – now a hotel. Named after the Rossini opera – La Gazza Ladra means 'thieving magpie' – it takes its magpie credentials seriously in its (uninspiring) black and white décor. It can be quiet – local competition is stiff, with Michelin stars shining nearby. But you leave in a sweet haze of culinary ecstasy. And thinking that it deserves two stars.

5 courses tasting menu 70 euros, 9 courses 90 euros. Website: www.ristorantelagazzaladra.it Phone: (+39) 0932 755655 or email: info@ristorantelagazzaladra.it.



Il Vignale, Sicily

3) If it's the luxury of utter tranquility and a charming rural retreat far off the beaten-mud-and-volcanic-lava track that you're after – Il Vignale near S. Stefano di Camastra on the north coast of Sicily hits the spot. (See *Lusso's Sizzling In Sicily*). Go there to lounge by the pool with 360-degree valley views, to chill with the lads, catch up on star-gazing (of the night sky variety) and to combine beach and countryside in the laziest of days. You'll drink excellent local wines and feast on stuffed *zucchini* flowers, melting pastry parcels of *melanzane* and tender black-skinned pig – a speciality from the nearby Nebrodi Mountains. And you'll sleep like a bambino. Call it *la dolce vita*.

Book through villa specialist soloSicily, www.solosicily.com, Phone: +44 20 7097 1413, Car hire: www.sbc.it or email: sbc@sbci.it.



4) Donna Carmela is a super stylish 18-bedroom boutique hotel. It's not just remarkable because Mount Etna stands in the background smoking, booming and rumbling explosively as it sends red-hot molten lava cascading down its slopes. The pigeon-grey 19th century country house is also situated in a divine Mediterranean and sub tropical nursery of 5000 varieties of plant – Sicily's biggest nursery – midst ferns, swaying palms, flowering maple, cacti and citrus trees: at dusk the air heady with the scent of orange blossom and jasmine. Oh and just for good measure, DC's foreground is the Ionian Sea, twinkling at night with the moon dancing on the water and shooting stars falling towards it. Can it be true? Is there really such a romantic place outside the pages of Mills & Boon? Yes. Additionally it boasts the sort of eclectic and imaginative interior of

discreetly' dreams – think rough plaster walls, a library with walls of volcanic rock, staircases of

decorations – dreams – thick rough plaster walls, a hallway with walls of volcanic rock, stair case of metal, table hewn of an entire tree trunk on sculptural metal legs. And if ever you tire of lolling in its magical grounds, drinking award-winning wine that's made exclusively for its owners, the Faro family, or dining on prawn ceviche in almond milk, sublime home-made black ink spaghetti and fresher-than-fresh greens plucked from the garden – great food although the service can be slow – then you can always hike in Mount Etna's fertile foothills, clambering up its chestnut and hazelnut tree-clad slopes or take a heli ride over this, the highest active volcano in Europe, to discover its fiery secrets. Then set off to lap up the history of Syracuse, the Baroque town of Acireale, the black cliffs of Catania and the charm of Taormina. It doesn't get much better than this.

Book through *Just Sicily*: www.justsicily.co.uk, Phone: +44 1202 489040, Car hire: www.sbc.it or email: sbc@sb.it.

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5) Want a luxury convertible, a station wagon, minivan, cabriolet or an off-road vehicle? Perhaps a sexy Vespa scooter? When it comes to wheels, Sicily by Car has been Sicily's leading car hire company since 1963: that's a cool half-century. You can pick up your vehicle in one location and drop it in another – whether Palermo, Catania or Trapani. Or even the smaller places like Messina, Cefalu and Sciacca. Alternatively you can book a meet-and-greet service and chauffeur, with as little as three hours' notice. Once behind the wheel, the trick is to drive on the right-hand side of the road – very fast. And to disregard the rules of white, blue and yellow zone parking! Just joking. Sicily has mountainous terrain – and the roads can be hazardous, bendy and covered in lava dust. You'll whizz past vineyards, fields of tomatoes and olive and citrus groves, the hot wind blowing on your face. Once off the motorway, the streets can be as narrow as a pair of outspread arms. So driving on the Palermo and Catania roads during rush hour is super fun. Sicily by Car has now expanded throughout Italy under the Auto Europa brand – with a network of over 53 offices throughout the most important Italian cities, major airports and the top tourist locations – and has a fleet of over 19,000 vehicles, including all the latest models. On top of that, amazingly it also offers the most competitive prices. Motoring in your Sicily by Car vehicle is the best way to see the island's natural beauty and architectural wonders. What's not to like?

Sicily by Car S.p.A. – Autoeuropa www.sicilybycar.autoeuropa.it, Phone: +39 0916390303, or email: business@sb.it.

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6) Imagine a country home surrounded by the Ibleo plateau and carob trees; one with thick white stone walls, and an enormous tower; and, inside, chokka with precious fabrics, rare maps, and religious artefacts, including a 17th century picture of the Virgin Mary. This is Eremo della Giubliana, near Ragusa – the home of noblewoman Vincenza Iolanda Nifosi. It's a 15th century, family-run former convent snapped up by the Knights of the Order of St John who gave it to the family in 1750. Check in at a reception that's in the former chapel then sleep where once monks laid their heads – now bedrooms with ancient limestone floors and antique beds.

Savour breakfast in the refectory: a spread of just-picked figs, artisan cheeses, home-cured hams and homemade polenta cake. Take lunches and dinners in the courtyard – tended by staff who are beyond charming. They serve (sometimes too) complex creations made from local, seasonal produce by chef Giorgio Ruggeri. (He also gives Sicilian cookery lessons using the estate's antique grains, and following ancient recipes from the Hyblean aristocracy.) Days are spent idly drinking wines stored in the former crypt, by the pool or in the fragrant garden sitting among ancient quince trees, Mediterranean herbs and an ancient Arab fountain. Wander among the property's centuries-old olive trees and you'll find a small spa opposite an archaeological site dating from the fifth to third century BC. Oh, and a private airstrip. Plus, on a clear day, you can spy the African coast. Best book all 22 bedrooms and five stone, traditional Highland-style cottages for the ultimate party.

Book through www.eremodellagiubliana.com, Phone: +39 0932 669119, Car hire: www.sbc.it or email: sbc@sb.it.





7) The Grand Hotel Villa Igiea is a 5-star hotel in a 1904 villa bang on the Palermo coast, in Sicily's historical capital. The hotel is imposing, old-fashioned and delightfully faded. And backs onto the port and Bay of Palermo, with its sailing and speedboats and dry dock. It has 116 bedrooms and suites – some overlooking Monte Pellegrino and others with a giardino vista: a centuries-old garden stepping prettily down to the sea. Restored by renowned Art Nouveau architect Ernesto Basile at the end of the 19th century for the Florio family, the hotel still boasts its original frescoes, decoration and furniture. (The architect's eponymous Belle Epoque ballroom, the Sala Basile, alone is worth a trip.) Nab concierge Philip to take you deep into the earth, to the erstwhile bomb shelter; to dig out his copies of photos of World War II tanks and American soldiers at the hotel's entrance; and to spirit you into the original owner Donna Franca Florio's museum-like room. Then venture outside for dusty museums, Arabian domes and some spectacular Baroque architecture plus boisterous markets, chaotic traffic and oppressive summer heat. Afterwards, return to your damask, gold and gilt bedroom – to be transported into the golden age of Sicily's aristocracy, and the pages of *The Leopard*. Is it opulent? Oh yes.

Grand Hotel Villa Igiea www.villa-igiea.com, Phone: +39 091 631 2111, Car hire: www.sbc.it or email: sbc@sbc.it.



8) High tech and Sicily?! Not natural bedfellows. Yet solo Sicily's villa Hydra offers the highest of high-tech. Everything from touch screen controls to an up-to-the-second kitchen, chromatic pool lighting and much more is available in this fantabulous 4-storey villa perched on the island's north east coast, looking out to the Aeolian Islands. So cast aside any thoughts of crumbling or faded Sicilian grandeur: this is a classy villa, designed to impress. Imposing stone archways, shady terraces and gardens dotted with fruit trees lull you into a sense of the familiar... until you step inside, into a vast light-filled space with an internal gallery and endless sea views through ginormous picture windows. Bedrooms veer from a sexy shocking-pink boudoir with large circular bed to the master bedroom with its adjacent fitness suite complete with a Turkish bath. Showering takes on a whole new meaning, with a bewildering range of chromotherapy options for you to puzzle out happily. Sweltering summer temperatures are best enjoyed in the to infinity-and-beyond pool and on local beaches. Or visit in Spring or Autumn to head inland to the Madonie and Nebrodi National Parks – where ancient churches and *palazzi* jostle for space in

mountain villages and wild mushrooms and *salumeria* produced from the local much-prized black pig show up on the best tables. So gather up your nearest and dearest, tick the box for maid service, bag an in-house chef and away you go...

A week starts at £6538 (sleeps 9) with www.solosicily.com. Car hire: www.sbc.it or email: sbc@sbci.it.

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