

TRAVEL

Sizzling in Sicily

AUGUST 28, 2014 · 4 MINUTE READ



Il Vignale, Sicily



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If you want a laid-back week, search no further. Alternatively if you're keen to go with a group of friends to party and chill somewhere rural, simple and charming, this is it. Or if you simply hanker after a beach-and-countryside holiday, book this now. Welcome to Il Vignale, a traditional 1860s villa near S. Stefano di Camastra on the north coast of Sicily. It sleeps 15 in seven bedrooms, big enough to get lost in happily for days – and is one of many fantastic villas offered by soloSicily.

Il Vignale is surrounded by hills and olive groves – with uninterrupted 360-degree views of the surrounding countryside – with the Tyrrhenian beckoning enticingly at the valley's end. An active Lusso Man will charter a yacht; visit the Santa Anastasia Winery – a restored abbey where good vino is produced; tee off at Le Madonie Golf Resort; and then return with the snow to stay in Il Vignale and then ski at Piano Battaglia.

Instead we opt initially to do less than nothing – and to recover from such exertions, we take lengthy Sicilian *siestas*. We loll by the poolside – not just any old pool but an infinity one with spectacular views; hang out *al fresco* – savouring Sicilian feasts magicked up by Maria, the *perfetto* cook; soak up local colour lazily – by watching The Godfather and the Leopard films; play poker in the massive hall with exposed brickwork and arched ceilings; and luxuriate in our four-poster, the window open onto the star-spangled night sky.

Sometimes Dario Dragotto, the *simpatico* owner, pops over with a ready smile, gifts of organic, home-grown vegetables – the *cucuzza*, a long serpent-like courgette, is a particular favourite – bottles of home-pressed olive oil from his groves and red wine he's made.

After days of R&R, we stir ourselves to leave the villa in a car with high ground clearance and one which doesn't require air conditioning set to zero simply to have enough power to get up the vertiginous road! ('Before ascending the hill,' reads the guidebook, 'we recommend you turn off the air conditioning and take a bit of a running start.' Truly.) With A/C on full blast, we take the hill at speed. We soon reach atmospheric local villages with cobbled streets, ginormous churches, and houses with verandas in peeling sun, sand and ochre paintwork – beside which are 1960s canary yellow Cinquecentos.

We drive to Santo Stefano di Camastra (*paese della ceramica*) with its zillions of shops selling local hand-painted ceramics and colourful majolica pottery. Here we eat *calzone* – sweet brioche bread baked with *mozzarella* – and *arancine* (fried rice balls stuffed with *ragu*). For the sturdier of heart, there's *Il Pane con la Meusa* (veal spleen sandwiches) or *le Stigghiole* (barbecued lambs' intestines). If you want figs in the market, make sure you ask for '*fichi*' not '*figa*' (the latter means 'pussy', since you ask, and not the kind that goes meow).

When we're not trying innards, we visit the pebbly beach Spiaggia di Villa Margi at Reitano and the one at Castel di Tusa. And while away idle hours in Cefalu with its awe-inspiring cliff (La Rocca) looming above the town and Norman *duomo*. Back at the villa, we hike in the Garden of Eden at the end of our drive – with its almost-dry riverbeds, wild fennel and bushes laden with blackberries. The unspoilt Nebrodi National Park – carpeted oaks, beech and sycamore maples – is on our doorstep.

All too soon it's time to go home. As we hit the motorway, we're reminded that many Sicilians beat Fernando Alonso when driving in the left lane. We zoom into Lewis Hamilton mode in our Sicily By Car- hired wheels. And wave cheerily as we pass all the Alonsos. But, in truth, we remain sad to leave. Upset that our car even made it to the top of Il Vignale's steep hill...

Il Vignale is bookable through villa specialist soloSicily, www.solosicily.com, tel. +44(0)20 7097

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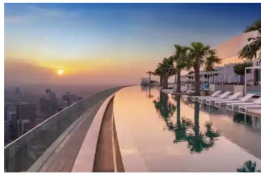
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1413. soloSicily was founded by Sicilian-born Roberto Sortino and has a property portfolio of villas and apartments throughout coastal and inland Sicily – from large aristocratic estates to properties suitable for short romantic breaks. From the latest addition to the portfolio, Solena, a cool and contemporary 2-bedroom apartment with rooftop Jacuzzi and beach access, to Il Poggio set in the hills outside Palermo.

Or bag the Villa Hydra (sleeps 9 and prices start at 7150 Euros) if you want a fitness area, Turkish bath and Jacuzzi. Additional services include in-house cook team to yacht charter. www.solosicily.com or +44(0)20 7097 1413.

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