

ESCAPE TO CASALNUOVO

By Caroline Phillips



The sky is streaked pink and purple. There are hills that recede into the distance where the Tyrrhenian Sea twinkles and the magical Aeolian islands stick temptingly out of the water. The villa is surrounded by an organic estate with olive trees, two gamboling dogs and a vegetable garden with sun-blushed tomatoes, beans and squash. Nearby are the Nebrodi mountains with walking trails, lakes, streams and woods.




Welcome to the off-the-beaten-volcanic track. This is Casalnuovo villa in Tindari, Sicily. A charming place where few tourists go.



It sleeps 15 – perfect for families or big groups or even a business conference. Its pool looks over the rolling hills and days are spent doing gentle laps. Or lying in the sun. One day Carlo, a chef, comes and teaches us how to make pizzas. Slugging back red wine and with Sicilian good cheer, he shows us how to knead the dough and flip it in the air, before putting just-picked tomatoes and tangy local cheese on top. For all this, there's a wood-burning pizza oven in the garden.

Another day, we go riding on Arab horses that are a mere trot from the property. We canter up paths bordered by cypruses and lemon trees, the air thick with the scent of fennel.

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Further afield, the Franchetti winery beckons. (Wine producer Andrea Franchetti looks like a young Yves Saint Laurent). His rosé tastes like roses, and one red tastes deliciously like caramel: these are wines that are profound, unique and superb. There's also Cefalu for a day trip – with its Norman duomo and seafront. Plus Mount Etna – the largest and most volatile volcano in Europe. At night, it booms theatrically and spills molten lava down its sides, splashing red under the stars.

As for food, the holiday is a hit. In Montalbano – the nearest town to Casalnuovo – we find the local speciality of fresh macaroni with pork sauce. Also worth trying are its Croccantino Bianco, a hazelnut concoction covered in white chocolate. Then there's Fattoria Grattazzo, a remote farm house with geese and dogs wandering around outside. (It's 15 minutes from the villa). The owner, a septuagenarian, makes all his own cheeses – including the creamiest of ricottas – and home-cured meats. He offers a rustic and delicious menu with no choice.



In Palermo, a two hour drive away, we go to one of the best friggitorie (fried food shops), I Cuochini, for *arancini* (rice balls), *timballini di pasta* (deep-fried pasta), *pasticcino* (a sweet pastry filled with mince) and *sfinciuni*, a soft flat bread topped with tomatoes, onion, anchovies, cheese, toasted breadcrumbs and oregano. It's little more than a Euro per item.

For those who wish to strike further afield (by helicopter is best), there's a tip-top fish restaurant, Da Vittorio. ("My favourite place in Sicily is Da Vittorio Ristorante, a fish restaurant on the beach in Porto Palo di Menfi," recommends chef Giorgio Locatelli). The antipasti includes the sweetest of red prawns, swordfish carpaccio, octopus in oil and lemon juice and whatever the fishermen have caught that day. It's almost worth a trip from London for its pasta with sea urchins, pasta with mixed seafood, and catch of the day grilled on the barbecue.





Back at Casalnuovo, we put our feet up to watch the evening spectacle of a star-spangled sky, glasses of local limoncello in hand. We admire the 360-degree view and the twinkling lights of boats bobbing on the sea in the distance. There's nothing in our minds but the thought of yet another lazy day. One of swimming, sun bathing and enjoying nature. Of riding on the Arab horses stabled at the bottom of the estate. What could be more relaxing?

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Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines and various luxury websites. To see more of her work, go to www.carolinephillips.net.

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