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THERE'S SOMETHING SPECIAL ABOUT SICILY

By Caroline Phillips

There's something special about Sicily. As Vogue Editor Alexandra Shulman has written, 'Oranges are more orange in Sicily.' And as Goethe wrote, 'The key to Italy is Sicily.' Whichever way you look at it, this once-rich island, the biggest in the Med, is magical. It's famed for its Baroque, Byzantine and Corinthian architecture, cliff-top villages, beautiful beaches, stylish hotels and superb cuisine. I experienced first the luxury of tranquillity and life in the slowest of slow lanes in agroturismo Il Vignale (a week in a way-off-the-beaten-track north coast villa), before taking to the road for a further week to round up the best of the rest of places to stay.



IL VIGNALE

If it's the luxury of utter tranquillity and a charming rural retreat way off the beaten volcanic-lava track that you're after, Il Vignale near S. Stefano di Camastra on the north coast of Sicily is just the ticket. The road there is a character-building mixture of hairpin bends and crumbly tarmac – but it's all worth it once you arrive. As we shut our car doors, we turned to face the panorama laid out in front of the house. The feeling of peace and expansion was rejuvenating; just the valley with its wild rocky hills, a fierce blue sky – and silence.

There were, of course, immediate plans to hike up one of the hills, but I'm glad to say that our stay at Il Vignale undid every scrap of our willpower – as all good poolside holidays should. You go there to lounge by the pool with 360-degree valley views, to chill with friends, catch up on star-gazing and to combine beach and countryside in the laziest of days. Oh, and to drink excellent local wines and feast, feast and feast. Maria, the chef, magics up zucchini flowers delicately stuffed with the freshest ricotta, melting pastry parcels of porcini or melanzane, and spinach-like tenerumi with homemade pasta, plus tender black-skinned pig – a speciality from the nearby Nebrodi Mountains.

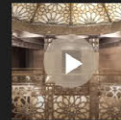


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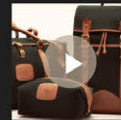
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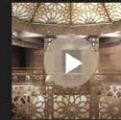
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The house itself is an attractive brick villa with a cool, stony interior and seven bedrooms from which to choose. The rooms are simple and authentic, with stone floors, white walls and heavy wooden shutters. The master bedroom has a four-poster bed and a better-than-Heaven view across the valley. Think location, location, location. At the front of the house, there is a forecourt with a path winding down to the pool, and at the rear is a shady terrace with a long wooden table for group meals. The kitchen is industrially large, perfect for conjuring up meals out of food with zero miles – the owner brings in his olive oil and baskets of organic vegetables – and it's equipped for catering for large numbers, with the emphasis on function over charm.

Most of our time at Il Vignale was spent meandering – paperbacks and sun-cream in hand – between the infinity pool and the house, between breakfast, late lunch and long, convivial suppers on the terrace. But we did venture out once or twice, driving up the steep road, past Il Vignale's olive groves, into nearby Santo Stefano di Camastra. The town is renowned for its hand-painted ceramics and pottery – there are exhibitions and workshops to visit. Plus there are plenty of little restaurants for a supper of still-flipping seafood. We chose to forego our restaurant dolce in favour of local gelati available at cafes throughout the town. These we licked happily while strolling beneath the stars and watching little boys play endless late night games of football in the main square. Television? What's that?!



In the surrounding area, the seaside villages Pettineo, Motta D'Affermo and Mistretta, are simple and pretty. You can also visit the Aeolian Islands by hydrofoil from Milazzo or Cefalu, and the nearby Nebrodi Mountains – if you want animals, plants and trees. On the sea-facing side of the mountains, you can descend directly to the shore and the Tyrrhenian Sea. Or so I'm told. But did I tell you about the infinity pool, the sun-cream and our Kindles?

Despite the opportunities for exploring, Il Vignale is best suited to families or friends who want primarily to laze by the H2O. It's easy to lose track of time, but the villa features a novel device: a daily influx of swooping little birds who announce the cocktail hour and the end of a hard day's sunbathing.

Book through villa specialist soloSicily – www.solosicily.com. Tel – +44 (0)20 7097 1413.

BEST OF THE REST

Donna Carmela

Donna Carmela is a corker of a hotel, boasting as it does rooms with both a volcano vista and a sea view. Mount Etna booms theatrically in the background, red molten lava burning down its slopes, and the Ionian Sea twinkles happily in the foreground. This stylish boutique hotel of just 18 bedrooms in Sant'Alfio nestles in a nursery of 5000 Mediterranean and sub tropical plants – giving guests strolling rights among bonsai olive, fig trees and ginormous cacti. Add to this an interior that's decorated with flair and quirkiness – it boasts rough plaster walls and ornamental antique farming implements alongside funky contemporary pieces (think Philippe Starck chairs, a metal staircase and a fabulous table fashioned from an tree trunk on sculptural metal legs), and bingo, you have the perfect romantic getaway. Forget the land of milk and honey. At Donna Carmela, they go one better – it's the land of Mount Etna cheese and honey.

Book through Just Sicily – www.justsicily.co.uk. Tel – +44 (0)1202 489040. For car hire, go to www.sbc.it or email scb@scb.it.



Eremo della Giubilana

If you want to stay in the home of noblewoman Vincenza Iolanda Nifosi, then Eremo della Giubilana, near Ragusa, is the place (you can arrive there on its private airstrip.) It's a 15th century, family-run former convent snapped up by the Knights of the Order of St John, who then sold it to the Vincenza's family in 1750. Since then, it's been lovingly restored by her son, architect and Renaissance man Salvatore Mancini and now has 19 bedrooms and five cottages. It has an imposing ancient tower – once a defence against pirates – dry stone walls and secret hidden courtyards. Reception is in the former chapel and comfortable bedrooms are in erstwhile monks' cells, some with ancient limestone floors and four-poster beds. Everywhere there are antiques, heirlooms, suits of armour and religious artefacts. Plus there's a vaulted gunroom with shotguns dating from 1900. Breakfast in the one-time refectory is a feast of local, creamy ricotta, home-cured hams, the tastiest of homemade flans and prickly pears. While lunches and dinners are elaborate Sicilian affairs using local, organic and seasonal ingredients – the food too complicated for some tastes – taken in the courtyard and served by staff who are super simpatico. Days are spent idly by the pool or in the garden among ancient quince and medlar trees, drinking wines pulled from a cellar in the former crypt, and having Sicilian cookery lessons – using the estate's antique grains and following ancient recipes from the Hyblean aristocracy. Salvatore with perfect English and an encyclopaedic local knowledge also takes guests in his 4WD to the family's UNESCO-listed gorge and valley nearby – which boasts 12 ancient mills, natural swimming pools, and air pungent with the scent of figs and wild herbs. Plus the nearby Baroque splendours of Syracuse and Noto, and ancient catacombs, are enough to make the largest guidebook burst cheerfully.

Book through www.eremodellagiubilana.com. Tel – +39 0932 669119. For car hire, go to www.sbc.it or email [sbcsbc@sb.it](mailto:sbc@sb.it).





Grand Hotel Villa Igiea

Grand Hotel Villa Igiea, built in 1904, is one of those majestic, old-fashioned and delightfully faded hotels with bedrooms of gold, damask and gilt – including original decorations, frescoes and Art Nouveau furnishings – and it has a glorious terrace looking onto wide gardens of pine, palm and bougainvillea that extend prettily to the sea. It has Monte Pellegrino as a backdrop and overlooks the Port of Palermo with its sailing and pleasure boats. This five-star hotel's big lure is that it's bursting with history – from the 1934 documentary about it, complete with flapper gels in bathing costumes – to its walls decked with big photos of King Carlos and Edward VII staying there. Add to that the fact that the villa was restored by Art Nouveau architect Ernesto Basile at the end of the 19th century for the Florio family, and you get the picture. The food isn't tip-top. But where else can you walk past a massive Giovanni Boldini 1924 oil portrait of the original owner, Donna Franca Florio, (bought for \$1m 12 years ago) in the ballroom-size breakfast room to pick over the buffet of pistachio and plum slices, cannoli and crema di Ricotta and brioches with coffee granita?

Book through www.villa-igiea.com. Tel – +39 091 631 2111.

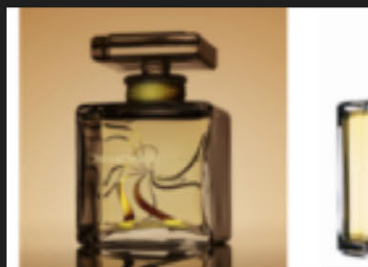


Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines, to various luxury websites. To see more of her work, go to www.carolinephillips.net.

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