



# The new Sicilian

Although fiercely proud of the island's art treasures, olive groves and extraordinary cultural legacy, Sicily's new generation refuses to remain trapped in the past with the rise of anti-Mafia associations, boutique wineries and farm-stays. Words by Lisa Gerard-Sharp. Photographs by Lola Akinmade Åkerström >>





# “Don’t go to Palermo with an itinerary, go with an open heart,”

pleads Sicilian fashion designer Domenico Dolce. The advice is wise and melodramatic in equal measure. No map does justice to the city’s Moorish muddle, baroque flamboyance and brooding Spanish grandeur. The Royal Palace still astounds with its mosaic-encrusted Palatine Chapel, a picture of oriental splendour. Persian octagonal stars, palm trees and peacocks segue into chess players and entwined dancers. Around the corner, the red-domed San Giovanni degli Eremiti is similarly Moorish.

Nearby, Ballarò Market, reminiscent of an Arab souk, sells street food, ranging from rice balls and spicy pizza to chickpea fritters. The refined pastry shops respond with *pasta reale* — marzipan sculpted into fruit shapes.

The Piazza Marina, meanwhile, provides shade under the mighty banyan trees. The calm belies the square’s violent past as a site of public executions. As the former seat of the Spanish Inquisition, the newly restored Palazzo Chiaramonte pits its great hall against the pathos of prison walls studded with pleas for mercy. Close by is the decadent Palazzo Mirto, a princely home that evokes the ‘voluptuous torpor’ portrayed in *The Leopard*.

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa’s literary swan-song of the Sicilian nobility, still strikes a chord with lovers of Italy’s most inscrutable island. The definitive Sicilian novel, it chronicles cultural shifts during the 1860s. This seductive portrait of a decadent society is also the closest the island has come to exploring its capacity for change. In the novel, the fictional prince prefers not to raise a finger in politics — ‘it would only get bitten’.

History is seen as a cruel stepmother to Sicily, despatching cavalcades of Romans, Greeks, Arabs, Normans and Spaniards to dominate the island. And Sicily has often sleepwalked through its own history. Every ‘Sicilian renaissance’ runs aground on its inability to restructure society and dislodge the ‘shadow state’ of the Mafia. Yet we lap up the brooding drama, the baroque heritage, the ravishing

scenery, the sense of living on the brink. But there are stirrings of change, from a movement against the Mafia to an opening up to outsiders.

The shift has already ushered in Slow Food farm-stays, boutique wine resorts, and transformed baroque ballrooms into B&Bs. If nothing else, the sleepily seductive ‘Last Leopards’ should still be lurking in their gilded lairs, waiting to suffocate their prey with Sicilian hospitality. My quest is to see whether the Leopard can ever change its spots. Or whether the beast, in all its camouflage, is just too beautiful to tame.

## Into the lair

You can even stay in the ‘Leopard’s lair’, the last home of its legendary author. Owned by Lampedusa’s heirs, Butera 28 offers cookery courses. Here, Sicilian hospitality is legendary, as cloyingly sweet as the local *cassata* sponge cake.

After a long slumber, the city is slowly stirring, renovating palaces and reviving neglected districts. Until recently, Palermo had turned its back on the sea but a new promenade tempts Palermitans to linger in the waterfront gardens or flirt on funky, marble-clad beds dotted along the shore. At cocktail hour, I mingle with the smart set in Kursaal Kalhesa, a charming spot just off the seafront. Would-be princelings sit in the jasmine-scented courtyard, and indulge in Arab-tinged fusion food and full-bodied Sicilian wine. The city still occasionally slips into languid Leopard mode, yet, against the odds, a serious, civic-minded society is also being forged.

The *Cosa Nostra* (Mafia) has wormed its way into every corner of Sicilian life, but a sea change is underway, led by grassroots anti-Mafia associations. Pope Benedict has preached against the Mafia in Palermo, where the city’s new mayor is the veteran crusader Leoluca Orlando. When I first met this fiery white knight, back in the dark days of the 1990s, he was either sleeping in a bunker or bed-hopping several times a night to >>

**Previous spread:** Elderly Sicilian man takes a stroll in the Madonie Mountains; Two teenagers in the sleepy mountainside village of Gratteri.

**Left:** Old model Fiat Cinquecento





avoid attack. Now the four-times mayor can snooze in his own bed rather than fear ‘sleeping with the fishes’. Law-abiding Sicilians are also challenging the long arm of the Mafia. Paying protection money, known as the *pizzo*, is widespread but, led by the Addiopizzo (Goodbye Pizzo) organisation, more than 700 Palermitan businesses have signed up to an anti-extortion charter. Following their ethical map, you can eat, shop and sleep in places that are standing up to the Mafia.

This walk takes in the moody Arab-Norman cathedral that has witnessed countless wailing tributes to murdered magistrates. Built on the site of a mosque, the cathedral is a Sicilian hybrid of Norman tombs and Moorish tracery. In the Piazza della Memoria, we fall silent at the stark memorial to anti-Mafia martyrs.

Moving on to the Antica Focacceria restaurant, we tuck into Palermitan street food in the first inn brave enough to denounce its extortionists to the police. The beef spleen in a bun is not for the squeamish, but then neither is extortion. Around the corner, Emporio Pizzo-Free sells only goods made by ‘Mafia-free’ businesses. I fall for a chic *coppola*, the cloth cap synonymous with mobster style, but now reclaimed as a symbol of redemption by the anti-Mafia lobby. Edoardo Zaffuto, founder of Addiopizzo, tells me he dreams of “a popular

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revolution against the Mafia” and feels the Mob is slowly being challenged. An Addiopizzo logo in the shop window signifies ‘Beware of the dog — we bite, we won’t back down’.

If bitten by the anti-Mafia bug yourself, take a dedicated tour through northwest Sicily and enjoy tasty home-cooking as well as Mafia lore and lairs. Far from being a ghoulish *Godfather* trip, it’s a sensuous journey into a Sicily rarely seen by outsiders. By staying on farms confiscated from the Mob, you’ll drink ‘uncontaminated’ wine while listening to spine-tingling stories of captured Dons. There’s an undeniable frisson in devouring spicy aubergine *caponata* (stew) near Corleone, on an organic farm once owned by Godfather Toto Riina.

### Hill towns and Greek gods

Looking for a Sicily beyond the Mob, I drive to the desolate, sun-parched province of Enna, home to crumbling hill towns, ancient Greek ruins and former Roman outposts. Here, the Sicilian revival takes the form of a cultural shift. Enna is sacred ground as the centre of the cult of Demeter, the Greek goddess of fertility. And she has finally come home — the Venus of Morgantina, a statue of Demeter stolen from Sicily in the 1970s and sold to the Getty Museum, was returned to its birthplace last year and now has its own museum in the

town of Aidone. This has inspired the creation of a new circuit embracing the neighbouring town of Piazza Armerina and the newly-restored Villa Romana del Casale. Although Piazza Armerina is upstaged by the villa — Sicily’s greatest wonder of the Roman world — the rust-coloured hill town has a faded elegance all of its own. Beside the cathedral, the new Palazzo Trigona museum endeavours to make sense of the story.

Outside town, Villa Trigona, a baronial B&B, is home to the gracious Baroness Adele Trigona, who shows little remorse for the loss of her ancestral city home: “We adapt with the times,” — spoken like a wise Leopard. In keeping with Sicilian noble tradition, the family still has a private altar, where I say a prayer to Demeter for the preservation of the ‘last Leopards’ — along with their wild fennel pasta.

Just southwest, among oak and hazel woods, the Villa Romana’s mosaics have re-emerged after a lengthy restoration. In the Corridor of the Great Hunt, a swirling mass of movement reveals chariots, lions, cheetahs and rhinos. To the Romans, hunting meant food, sport, sensuality, adventure and pleasure, preferably all at once. The bare-breasted Queen of Sheba is being ogled by a tiger as well as by Romans, and bikini-clad girl gymnasts prove the bikini was not invented by Coco Chanel in the 1950s.

Sated with Roman sights, but still seeking signs of a Sicilian resurgence, I head through dusty hills to baroque southeast Sicily, which feels beyond the reptilian gaze of the Mafia. “This is the Val di Noto, an island within an island,” says my impromptu guide, Florenzo Melia. “While the west of Sicily was ruled by absentee barons, here the local gentry has always cherished the land.” He doesn’t add that, elsewhere, the embryonic Mafia slipped into the power vacuum, as estate managers.

Instead, here, near Chiaramonte Gulfi, rural enterprise is all around us. We gaze over the limestone terrain, carved into crests and canyons, and dotted with carob trees, olive groves and low-slung farmhouses. Some have been snapped up by foreigners, while others have featured in glossy feature films.

The 1693 earthquake wiped the architectural slate clean in the Val di Noto and gave free rein to the flamboyant new tastes of the ruling class. The baroque period ushered in a golden age for Sicilian architecture, a tantalising game of silhouettes and perspectives, wild ornamentation, fanciful balconies and flowing staircases.

In Noto, Mòdica, Ragusa, Scicli and Siracusa — the UNESCO-listed gems in the Val di Noto — the baroque architecture is a bold hybrid, as are the islanders themselves.

In Il Duomo, Ragusa’s gastro-haunt, celebrity chef Ciccio Sultano concurs: “My cooking is voluptuously baroque because I am baroque — I never remove anything from my recipes but just pile on more.”

Ragusa Ibla (the old town) encourages aimless wandering, leisurely lunches, and ruminations amidst a crumbling cityscape. Snapshots capture secret shrines, family crests and balconied palaces, often concealing bohemian bars. The Palazzo Cosentini’s balconies are a melange of fantastic bare-breasted sirens and monsters with flaring nostrils. Leering faces proffer serpents instead of tongues, a warning not to gossip. Following my nose, I plump for Artemisia, a boutique B&B, and a breakfast of Modica pastries before embarking on the well-trodden ‘Inspector Montalbano’ trail, linked to the popular detective series. The books’ fictional Mafia boss lives in Donnafugata Castle, a *One Thousand and One Nights* fantasy whose tarnished gilt, dusty chandeliers and patina of nostalgia evoke an atmosphere that owes much to *The Leopard*.

Perched on a ridge spilling down into the valley, rich, unshowy Mòdica conceals tawny palaces and the dazzling, baroque San Giorgio cathedral. For celebrity chef Giorgio Locatelli, Mòdica’s culinary revival is equally splendid, including the Antica Dolceria Bonajuto, >>

**Above, from left:** Hanging laundry in Gratteri; Baroque stairs of San Francesco d’Assisi cathedral in the UNESCO World Heritage town of Noto; Baroque churchyard water fountain in Ragusa





which makes macho Sicilian chocolate with more balls than the mobsters. Locatelli also swears by La Gazza Ladra's tuna burger, served with a shot of frozen lemon.

The arty Scicli, set between Mòdica and the sea, is a mesmerising spot enjoying a revival thanks to enlightened civic leaders and the Montalbano trail — the detective's office as seen in the films is actually the mayor's. Scicli's ochre-coloured facades are decorated with sirens, monsters and fauns, while the churches are equally flamboyant.

Towards Siracusa, recently restored Noto is the finest baroque town in Sicily, both blatantly theatrical and deeply rational. Visitors praise its proportion, symmetry and sense of spectacle. Sicilians simply call it 'a garden of stone'.

On Via Nicolaci, the Palazzo Villadorata is adorned with friezes of mythical monsters, a snarling parade of griffons, sphinxes, centaurs and cherubs. Opposite, in Modica di San Giovanni, I meet wine-maker Alessandro Modica and treat myself to Ragusan cheese and charcuterie, before enjoying some saffron ice cream at Caffè Sicilia.

In the southeast, Sicilian renewal is underway, coupled with a culinary shift. And much is down to the 'New Leopards' who have stepped out of their dusty ballrooms and into their wine estates. Alcamo's Sirignano Wine Resort, run by the savvy Marquis De Gregorio, has a creative chef who wows me with new-wave Sicilian cuisine, including pumpkin risotto spiced up with the estate's punchy Nero d'Avola.

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The spirit of *The Leopard* lingers on in overpowering Sicilian hospitality, which often catches me unawares, much like the grimacing faces on baroque balconies. Kindness comes in the form of marzipan pastries, a bunch of just-picked grapes, the keys to a long-closed church, or an impromptu tour of obscure Greek ruins. Possibly all at once. Accept it all, even when the offers bear no relation to what you wanted. Sicilians always know best. As the Prince says in *The Leopard*: 'Sicilians never wish to improve for the simple reason they believe themselves perfect.' >>



**From top:** Street art in Noto; The hills of Val di Noto in southeast Sicily



## essentials SICILY

### GETTING THERE

» British Airways flies from Gatwick to Catania. EasyJet flies from Gatwick to Palermo and Catania. Ryanair flies from Luton to Trapani or Stansted to Palermo. Thomson Airways flies from Manchester to Catania. [www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com) [www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com) [www.easyjet.com](http://www.easyjet.com) [www.thomsonfly.com](http://www.thomsonfly.com)

» **Average flight time:** 3h.

» **Train:** Take the slow route to Siracusa with a sleeper from Paris to Rome (ideally breaking the journey there) and then onto Sicily. [www.internationalrail.com](http://www.internationalrail.com)

### GETTING AROUND

» Unless travelling on an

organised tour, you'll need to hire a car.

### WHEN TO GO

» April-June and September-November are the best months for sightseeing and scenery, with spring flowers or the autumn wine harvest. Easter is mystical while February brings almond blossom — and skiing on Mount Etna.

### NEED TO KNOW

» **Currency:** Euro (€). £1 = €1.27.

» **International dialling code:** 00 39.

» **Time difference:** GMT +1.

### SLEEPS

» Artemisia Resort, Ragusa:

[www.artemisiareSORT.com](http://www.artemisiareSORT.com)

» Butera 28, Palermo:

[www.butera28.it](http://www.butera28.it)

» Conte Federico, Palermo: [www.contefederico.com](http://www.contefederico.com)

» Sirignano Wine Resort, Alcamo:

[www.sirignanowineresort.it](http://www.sirignanowineresort.it)

» Villa Trigona, Piazza Armerina: [www.villatrigona.it](http://www.villatrigona.it)

### EATS

» Antica Dolceria Bonajuto.

[www.bonajuto.it](http://www.bonajuto.it)

» Antica Focacceria, Palermo.

T: 00 39 091 320 264.

» Caffè Sicilia, Corso Vittorio. T: 00 39 0931 835 013.

» Il Duomo, Ragusa.

[www.ristoranteduomo.it](http://www.ristoranteduomo.it)

» Kursaal Kalhesa, Palermo.

[www.kursaalkalhesa.it](http://www.kursaalkalhesa.it)

» La Gazza Ladra, Modica.

[www.ristorantelagazzaladra.it](http://www.ristorantelagazzaladra.it)

### MORE INFO

» *Insight Guides: Sicily.*

RRP: £14.99.

» ABTOI: The Association of British Tour Operators to Italy. [www.loveitaly.co.uk](http://www.loveitaly.co.uk)

» *The Leopard* by Giuseppe Tomasi Di Lampedusa. RRP: £12.99.

### HOW TO DO IT

» Addiopizzo Travel offers itineraries including a Palermo walking tour, from £39; eight-day 'sun, sea and pizzo-free' island tour from £840 (£660);

10-day island food and wine tour combined with Mafia lore and lairs, from €990 (£778).

[www.addiopizzotravel.it](http://www.addiopizzotravel.it)

[www.addiopizzo.org](http://www.addiopizzo.org)

» Sunvil's eight-night self-drive Sicilian wine trail, staying at four wine estates, from £769 (two sharing) with flights from Gatwick, car hire, and two nights' B&B at each estate. A cooking lesson (with lunch) costs from £133 per person. [www.sunvil.co.uk](http://www.sunvil.co.uk)

» Think Sicily's Villa San Tommaso, near Noto, sleeps six, and costs from €5,920 (£4,713) per week, excluding flights. Casa di Pietra, near Modica, costs from €2,790 (£2,192) per week for six guests. [www.thinksicily.com](http://www.thinksicily.com) □

