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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Why your next vacation should be in Sicily

By **Carol Sottili**

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Where: Sicily

When to go: If sunshine is more important than warmth, go in April. Or choose October if you'll put up with a few showers in exchange for warmer temperatures. Summer is great for beach lovers, but it's crowded.

Why go: Sicily's culture has been richly molded by adversity. Plagues, earthquakes, wars, enslavements, revolts and volcanic eruptions have played outside roles in its dramatic history. The island's dizzying succession of conquering kingdoms left behind fascinating architectural remnants, including some of the world's best-preserved ancient Greek ruins. Plus, the food is great and the scenery lovely.

Logistics: Take a nonstop flight to Rome (Alitalia flies nonstop from Dulles), and then take a connecting flight to either Catania or Palermo. The best way to see Sicily is via rental car. Driving on the main roads is very manageable, although the larger cities can be daunting.

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Money: The currency is the euro. Credit cards are accepted at most urban restaurants, hotels and shops, but keep cash on hand.

Paperwork: U.S. citizens don't need a visa when traveling to Italy for up to 90 days. Passports need to be valid for at least six months beyond the travel period.

Language: Some argue that Sicilian is an Italian dialect, not a distinct language, but it's safe to say that an Italian would not understand a conversation among Sicilians. Even within the island, there are dozens of dialects. (Example: Tears of joy were shed at my son's baptism when my grandfather-in-law and my uncle discovered they shared the same minor Agrigento dialect.) English is not widely spoken outside the tourist centers. Italian is understood. Learning a few Sicilian words will be appreciated. Try using "salutamu" instead of "ciao" as a greeting.

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Health: No special precautions. Sticking to bottled water in rural areas is prudent.

Prevailing myth: Everyone who lives in Sicily is a Wiseguy, with connections to the Mafia. Even when the Cosa Nostra ruled Sicily, the vast majority of the population were not members. Instead, they were subjugated by organized crime. The Sicilian Mafia still exists, but many hope its heyday has passed.

Itinerary for first-timers: Focus on exploring Sicily's connection to ancient Greece and Rome. The 2,700-year-old city of Syracuse and the adjacent island of Ortygia offer windows through the centuries; sites include the Greek theater, Roman amphitheater, Temple of Apollo, Altar of Hieron II, Ear of Dionysius and the Archeological Museum. And don't miss Ortygia's lively street market and the Piazza del Duomo with its Baroque cathedral. In the Agrigento area, the Valley of the Temples is a must, offering an array of incredibly well-preserved ancient Greek structures. About 90 minutes east of Agrigento is Villa Romana del Casale, showcasing stunning Roman mosaics. In the Palermo area, connect with Sicily's Norman history at the Cathedral at Monreale and the Norman Palace; the city also offers several street markets for foodies. Break up the serious sightseeing with a tour of the active volcano Mount Etna and shopping in the seaside town of Taormina.

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Itinerary for repeat visitors: In Palermo, take in a performance at the magnificent Teatro Massimo, Italy's largest opera house, first opened in 1897. Delve more into Sicily's Baroque period with a visit to the southeast cities of Ragusa and Noto. Explore Sicily's burgeoning wine scene in the countryside around Noto and Syracuse. In the beach town of Cefalu, climb the steps to La Rocca summit and take in the view. Drive west of Syracuse to the Necropolis of Pantalica, with its honeycombs of ancient rock-cut tombs.

Eat this: Arancini (deep-fried rice balls). All versions of eggplant, but especially caponata. Any dish that includes sardines, which are caught off the coast; best if served with bucatini. And definitely cannoli, except in summer, when granita is the better choice.

Reading list: "The Leopard" by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa; "The Stone Boudoir: Travels Through the Hidden Villages of Sicily" by Theresa Maggio (out of print, but can be purchased used); "Seeking Sicily: A Cultural Journey Through Myth and Reality in the Heart of the Mediterranean," by John Keahey.

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Playlist: Traditional Sicilian folk music, especially songs that feature the chiaramedda, Sicily's version of the bagpipes: Tunes from the musical ensemble Malanova are a good place to start. And, yes, we do love the soundtrack from "The Godfather," but it contains only hints of traditional Sicilian tunes.

Cultural sensitivities: Don't refer to a Sicilian as an Italian. Don't treat Sicilians as less sophisticated than those from northern Italian regions: Stooped grandmothers in black garb are still part of the mix, but you're more likely to see young, fashionably dressed men and women. And don't make jokes about the Mafia.

Souvenirs: Pottery from the town of Caltagirone; a ceramic three-legged Trinacria, the symbol of Sicily; a handmade marionette; traditional Sicilian marzipan.

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Fun quote: "Sicily is more beautiful than any woman." — Truman Capote.

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