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By Stephanie Pearson



Sicilian Sizzle

OFFER HER AN ISLAND
SHE CAN'T REFUSE

MAYBE IT'S THE SULTRY, CITRUS-SCENTED BREEZE blowing off the Mediterranean. Or the sulfurous smoke that billows from the top of Mount Etna, a subtle reminder that Sicily is home to Vulcan, the Roman god of fire. Or perhaps it's because the enigmatic island is a perpetual tease—forever out of reach of the Italian mainland. Whatever the reason, this subtropical oasis can seduce almost anyone into misbehaving, it seems—slightly naughty behavior is the norm here.

It's fitting that D.H. Lawrence holed up with his wife, Frieda, in the town of Taormina, on Sicily's northeast coast, back in the 1920s to write *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, one of the most scandalous novels of its era. More recently, an ad campaign by a Sicilian hotel association declared: "Let your love bloom under the sun of Sicily." The deal was simple: Book a room at any of 24 of the island's Hotels del Sole, frolic between the sheets for a night or two, then return nine months later—with the fruit of your passion in tow—to claim a free weekend. Whether you're picnicking on mussels and moscato under a full moon near the Greek temple of Segesta, anchoring a yacht off a deserted beach near the medieval city of Cefalù, or looking for the Aeolian Islands from Etna's summit, Sicily is custom-made for coupling up.

Even faulty appliances can't break the spell. Paul Bennett and Lani Bevacqua, an American couple now living in Paris, sailed from mainland Italy to a villa west of Palermo for their honeymoon. On their first night, the washing machine sprang a leak, flooding their cozy Sicilian getaway in an unfortunate and ironic Venetian twist. Since everything moves

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A scooter is just the right
speed for enjoying the
local beauty.

04.

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slowly in Sicily, the washer wasn't fixed for ten days. But the newlyweds were so blissed out by the setting—backyard orchards heavy with lemons and figs, a private cliff-encircled beach accessible by a path out the back door, and a nearby market stocked with olives, wine, and rustic breads—that they soon abandoned sightseeing plans and lazed away the days at the villa. "All was forgotten in the sun, sea, and lemons," says Paul. Such is the Sicilian dolce vita.

The 9,830-square-mile island is peppered with spots ideal for such romance, but few compare to Masseria Mandracate. This 17th-century farmhouse is iconic Sicily: Cypresses line the driveway, geese strut through the courtyard, and the swimming pool sits like a mirage in a field overlooking olive groves and vineyards. The six farmhouse suites share the courtyard but are plenty private, with candlelight chandeliers, exposed beams, and spacious beds. And since the owner doubles as a fellow in the Italian Cooking Academy, you might be content to never leave the property. In case you do, plenty of diversions are close by, including the 11th-century hillside village of Piazza Armerina (the rumored retirement retreat of Emperor Maximian, who ruled Rome from A.D. 286 to 305, and home to the UNESCO World Heritage site Villa Romana del Casale), the village of Agrigento (an almost fully intact town dating to the sixth century), and Siracusa (a 27-century-old city famous for its temples of Zeus and Apollo).

If you feel the urge to break a sweat outdoors, scale Mount Etna, known in local parlance as Mongibello (from the Latin *mons* and Arab *jebel*, both meaning "mountain"). Etna is indeed a mountain's mountain, complete with lava deserts, wintertime skiing, and ample opportunities for secluded picnicking. Climb, take a bus, or ride a tram to the large craters near the 10,902-foot summit for views to the Aeolian Islands, home to Aeolus, Greek god of the winds.



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With stunning vistas,
fresh-from-the-sea
cuisine, and hotel rooms
you'll never want to
leave, Sicily is an ideal
spot for romance.



Access Sicily is a one-to-three-hour hop from major European airports or a ten-hour flight from the East Coast of the U.S. Alitalia has daily flights from New York's JFK to Catania and Palermo International airports. **Lodging** WorldLuxury (worldluxury.com) can help you book Masseria Mandracate (from \$7,900 per week for the entire villa or \$265 per night for a suite; masseriamandracate.it) and other island villas. **Attractions** San Francisco-based Mountain Travel Sobek (mtsobek.com) customizes Sicily hiking itineraries, including Mount Etna. Sausalito-based charter-yacht company Ocean Voyages (oceanvoyages.com) can tailor any boat-based Sicilian adventure.

To temper Etna's rugged moon-scape, head down to Taormina, the island's version of Monte Carlo, where Euro glitterati laze on beaches and wander tiny café-lined streets. From town, keep an eye on the mountain: Etna is the largest volcano in Europe, so it often produces geothermal fireworks—the perfect mood lighting.

Perhaps the best way to see Sicily is on a sailboat charter from Palermo to Messina, along the island's northern coast. Start with a stiff coffee in Palermo's La Cala neighborhood before setting sail for Cefalù, a medieval town with one of the best beaches in Sicily. Next sail on to Tyndaris, where the remains of an ancient Greek city perch on a cliff overlooking the sea. Then move on to the Aeolians, an archipelago of seven unspoiled volcanic islands. The ten-day tour winds down in Messina, the jumping-off point to mainland Italy.

In a perfect world this melting pot of myths, gods, and medieval castles would remain an isolated anachronism. But nothing this good can last: A proposed two-mile-long bridge connecting Sicily to the mainland is slated for completion in 2012—which means now is the time to visit, before the Fiat-driving mainlanders descend like flies to honey, and while you can still maintain the exquisite illusion that you have the place to yourselves. ☺