

History

From the massively powerful world empires to the wanton hands of feudal rulers and mysterious *mafiosi*, the people of Sicily have long been at the centre of brutal historical events. The island's position in the middle of the Mediterranean, between mainland Italy and North Africa, has meant that it has been involved in nearly every major Mediterranean war. Countless invaders, opportunists and reckless kings and emperors have influenced its language, art, architecture, food, religion and social habits, making Sicily a shimmering mosaic that reflects the entire Mediterranean history and culture.

SETTLING IN

The first evidence of an organised settlement on Sicily belongs to the Stentilleniensians, who came from the Middle East and settled on the island's eastern shores sometime between 4000 and 3000 BC.

But it was the settlers from the middle of the second millennium BC who radically defined the island's character and whose early presence helps us understand Sicily's complexities. Thucydides (c 460–404 BC) records three major tribes: the Sicaniensians, who originated either in Spain or North Africa and settled in the north and west (giving these areas their Eastern flavour); the Elymians from Greece, who settled in the south; and the Siculians (or Sikels), who came from the Calabrian peninsula and spread out along the Ionian Coast. Thus cultural divide was created from the start, a divide that was further deepened with the subsequent colonisation of the west of the island by Carthaginians from North Africa (c 850 BC) and the Greeks, who came to Sicily later, in the 8th to 6th centuries BC.

CITY STATES

Part One: Greeks & Phoenicians (or Civilisation, Splendour, Chaos & War)

The acquisition of the vast Mediterranean territories was a natural next step for the ever-expanding Greek city states. It all started with a group of Chalcidians who landed on Sicily's Ionian Coast in 735 BC and founded a small settlement at Naxos. They were followed a year after by the Corinthians, who built their colony on the southeastern island of Ortygia, calling it Syracoussai (Syracuse). The Chalcidians went further south from their own fort and founded a second town called Katane (Catania) in 729 BC, and the two carried on stitching towns and settlements together until three quarters of the island were in Hellenic hands.

The Italians, the oft-quoted classic by Luigi Barzini, is a wonderful analysis of the history, traditions and attitudes of the Italian people, with an excellent chapter on Sicily.

TIMELINE

12,000–10,000 BC

Stone Age settlers live in the caves of Monte Pellegrino and the Egadi Islands, leaving rock art still visible today.

1250–850 BC

First-known settlers arrive and found small colonies at Stentinello, Megara Hyblaea and on Lipari. They begin the lucrative business of trading obsidian. Carthaginians establish trading ports in the west at Palermo, Solunto and Mozia.

735–580 BC

Greek cities are founded at Naxos in 735, Syracuse in 734, Megara Hyblaea in 728, Gela in 689, and Selinunte and Messina in 628. Agrigento is established as a subcolony of Gela in 581.

AN ANCIENT FAMILY

Sicily's past stretches all the way back into the dirt and grime of prehistoric people – rock etchings at Levanzo and Monte Pellegrino attest to human settlements as far back as 12,000 BC. A skeleton discovered in a cave near Messina turned out to have belonged to a woman – later named Thea – who lived 14,000 years ago. Six other skeletons were discovered alongside hers, and are presumably members of her family. Thea's face was reconstructed by a sculptor, aided by anthropologists, at Palermo University in 2007. She was 165cm tall, above average for her time.

Check out the chronology of Ancient Greece and its time in Sicily at www.ancientgreece.com.

Naturally, the growing Greek power in the south and east of the island created uncomfortable tensions with the Phoenicians in the west; in turn, the Phoenicians' alliance with the powerful city-state of Carthage (in modern-day Tunisia) was of serious concern to the Greeks. By 480 BC the Carthaginians were mustering a huge invading force of some 300,000 mercenaries. Commanded by one of their great generals, Hamilcar, the force landed on Sicily and besieged Himera (near Termini Imerese), but the vast army was defeated by the crafty Greek tyrant Gelon, whose troops breached Hamilcar's lines by pretending to be Carthaginian reinforcements. The defeated Hamilcar performed self-immolation.

A much-needed period of peace followed in Sicily. The Greek colonies had lucrative trade deals thanks to the island's rich resources, and the remains of their cities testify to the extent of their wealth and sophistication. But their bad treatment of the native inhabitants (who could never attain citizenship), together with bitter rivalries and parochial politics, constantly undermined the Greeks' civic achievements and inevitably resulted in conflict.

The advent of the Peloponnesian Wars in Greece meant that Athens turned its attention to Syracuse. One hundred years earlier it would have been unthinkable for a Sicilian colony to challenge the hegemony of mainland Greece, but Syracuse was now a direct rival to Athenian power and it decided to challenge the Greek city. Athens, infuriated by the Sicilian 'upstart', decided to attack Syracuse in 415 BC, mounting upon it the 'Great Expedition' – the largest fleet ever assembled. Despite the fleet's size and Athens' confidence, Syracuse fought back and the mainland Greek army suffered a humiliating defeat. The victory over Athens marked the zenith of Syracusan power on the island.

Though Syracuse was celebrating its victory, the rest of Sicily was in a constant state of civil war. This provided the perfect opportunity for Carthage to seek its revenge for Himera, and in 409 BC a new army led by Hamilcar's bitter but brilliant nephew Hannibal wreaked havoc in the Sicilian countryside. It completely destroyed Selinunte, Himera, Agrigento and Gela and in 405 BC the Syracusan tyrant Dionysius I (405–367 BC)

Bone up on Greek tragedy by revisiting the classic plays of Aeschylus, including *Agamemnon*, *Oedipus* and *Prometheus Bound*, all premiered in Syracuse theatre.

launched a counteroffensive that resulted in the complete destruction of Mozia between 398 and 397 BC.

Although relative peace under Timoleon (r 345–336 BC) and later Hieron II (r 265–215 BC) brought stability to the island as its cities were rebuilt and the island repopulated with settlers from Greece and the Italian mainland, the days of Greek domination in Sicily were numbered.

Part Two: The Romans (or Slavery, Rebellion, Trade & Commerce)

Possession of Sicily was essential if Rome were to control the entire Mediterranean basin, and the advent of the First Punic War (264–241 BC) was a turning point for the island. The majority of Sicilians lived in horrifyingly reduced circumstances; native inhabitants were refused the right to citizenship and forced into indentured slavery on the pernicious *latifondi* – huge landed estates that were to cause so many of the island's woes in later years. Rome's less-than-enlightened rule led to a revolt in 135 BC. Led by Eunus of Henna (Enna), the revolt involved tens of thousands of the enslaved men, women and even children. No sooner had the Romans suppressed the first revolt than the Second Servile War broke out (104–101 BC), with the rebellious slaves supported by a large chunk of the island's peasant class.

Although essentially treated as a Roman breadbasket, Sicily regained its status as an important centre of trade during this period. Syracuse experienced a partial rebirth as an important commercial centre, and the period coincided with the construction of some of the finer monuments of the Roman occupation, including the Villa Romana di Casale. And finally, in the 3rd century AD – after some 500 years of Roman rule – Sicilians were granted the right to citizenship.

A BYZANTINE INTERLUDE

After Rome fell to the Visigoths in AD 410 Sicily was occupied by Vandals from North Africa, but their tenure was relatively brief. In 535 the Byzantine general Belisarius landed an army and was welcomed by a population that, despite over 700 years of Roman occupation, was still largely Greek, both in language and custom. The Byzantines were eager to use Sicily as a launching pad for the retaking of Saracen lands (those lands owned by the combined forces of Arabs, Berbers and Spanish Muslims, collectively known as the Saracens), but their dreams were not to be realised. A new power was emerging in the Mediterranean and its sights were firmly set on Sicily.

ENTER ISLAM

One of Sicily's most formative periods – which lasted over 200 years – started around the year AD 700. The Moors, who already controlled the North African coast, wanted to expand their power by taking charge of the Mediterranean trading routes. Sicily was, naturally, seen as a strategic stepping stone.

If Roman emperors float your boat, click on www.roman-emperors.org to find out all about the lives of these fascinating characters.

227 BC

Sandwiched between the superpowers of Carthage and Rome, Sicily becomes the unfortunate battleground for a war whose outcome is to place it firmly within the Roman Empire.

227 BC – AD 535

As the superpower's first colony, Sicily suffers the worst aspects of Roman rule: native inhabitants are refused the right of citizenship and forced into indentured slavery on the *latifondi* – huge landed estates.

530

A version of ice cream is said to have been championed in Sicily during the Roman rule, with a relay of runners bringing snow from Mt Etna and flavouring it for the wealthy patricians.

535

The Byzantine general Belisarius conquers Sicily. The Byzantines want to use the island as a launching pad for the retaking of Saracen lands; Syracuse temporarily supplants Constantinople as the capital of the empire in 663.

827–965

The Saracens land at Mazara del Vallo at the invitation of a Byzantine general rebelling against the emperor. Sicily is united under Arab rule and Palermo is the second-largest city in the world after Constantinople.

1059–72

Pope Nicholas II and Robert Guiscard sign a concordat at Melfi. Robert vows to expel the Saracens from Sicily. With the help of his younger brother, Roger I, the Normans seize Palermo 'for Christendom' in 1072.

For the most comprehensive coverage of island history invest in Moses Finlay's *A History of Sicily: Ancient Sicily to the Arab Conquest* or Denis Mack Smith's two excellent books, *Medieval Sicily 800-1713* and *Modern Sicily After 1713*.

Although the island had been subjected to repeated raids, it was not until 827 that a full-scale invasion took place when the Saracen army landed at Mazara del Vallo at the invitation of a Byzantine general rebelling against the emperor. In 831 Palermo fell, followed by Syracuse in 878.

The Arab rule was beneficial to the island in general. True, churches were converted to mosques and Arabic was implemented as the common language, but the Arabs also introduced much-needed land reforms and fostered the development of trade, agriculture and mining. New crops were introduced, including citrus trees, date palms and sugar cane, and most importantly, the Saracens developed and perfected a system of water supply and irrigation.

Sicily became an important centre for the expansion of Islam, but a policy of religious tolerance towards non-Muslims was also exercised (though many Sicilians converted to Islam to avoid paying the higher taxes imposed on non-Muslims).

After the invasion, Palermo was chosen as the capital of the emirate and, over the next 200 years, became one of the most splendid cities in the Arab world, a haven of culture and commerce rivalled only by Córdoba in Spain.

THE KINGDOM OF THE SUN

The Arabs called the Normans 'wolves' because of their barbarous ferocity and the terrifying speed with which they were mopping up territory on the mainland. By 1053, after six years of terrifying mercenary activity, Robert Guiscard (c 1015–85), the Norman conquistador, had comprehensively defeated the combined forces of the Calabrian Byzantines, the Lombards and the papal forces at the Battle of Civitate.

Having established his supremacy, Robert turned his attentions to expanding the territories under his control. To achieve this, he had to deal with the Vatican. But the Normans' relationship with the Vatican underwent a radical turn following the Great Schism of 1054 (which saw a complete break between the Byzantine and Latin churches). In return for being invested with the titles of duke of Puglia and Calabria in 1059, Robert agreed to chase the Saracens out of Sicily and restore Christianity to the island; as backup he summoned his younger brother Roger I (1031–1101) from Normandy that year. Roger landed his troops at Messina in 1061 and captured the port by surprise. In 1064 he tried to take Palermo but was repulsed by a well-organised Saracen army; it wasn't until Robert arrived in 1072 with substantial reinforcements that the city fell into Norman hands.

The great Palermo Mosque was immediately reconsecrated and Roger took on the title of count of Sicily (Conte Ruggero). Although he was an autocratic ruler, his firm hand and formidable army brought about Sicily's most magnificent era. Impressed by the cultured Arab lifestyle, Roger shamelessly borrowed and improved on it, spending vast amounts of money on palaces

and churches and encouraging a cosmopolitan atmosphere in his court. Roger wisely opted for a policy of reconciliation with the indigenous people; Arabic and Greek continued to be spoken along with French, and Arab engineers, bureaucrats and architects continued to be employed by the court. After Roger's death in 1101, Sicily was then governed by his widow, Adelasia (Adelaide), until 1130 when Roger II (1095–1154) was crowned king.

The Enlightened Leader

Roger II was a gifted monarch and a keen intellectual who studied the science of government and built an efficient civil service that was the envy of Europe. He assigned key posts to a number of non-Norman advisers; his finances and army were controlled by Arabs while his increasingly powerful navy was controlled by a Greek, George of Antioch. His court was unrivalled for exotic splendour and learning, while Roger flaunted his multicultural heritage by wearing Arab and Byzantine robes and even keeping a substantial harem. His rule was remarkable not only for his patronage of the arts but also for the creation of the first written legal code in Sicilian history, and his success in enlarging his kingdom to include Malta, most of southern Italy and even parts of North Africa.

But sadly this glorious chapter in the island's history was only to last a mere 64 years, eroded by the incompetence and self-indulgence of Roger's successors.

The Setting Sun

Roger's son and successor, William I (1108–66), inherited the kingdom upon his father's death in 1154. He was nicknamed 'William the Bad' and was a vain and corrupt king who paraded around the court with a bodyguard of black slaves.

The appointment of Walter of the Mill (Gualtiero Offamiglia) as archbishop of Palermo, at the connivance of the pope, was to create a dangerous power struggle between church and throne for the next 20 years – a challenge that was taken up by William II (1152–89) when he ordered the creation of a second archbishopric at Monreale.

William II's premature death at the age of 36 brought about a power grab, and an assembly of barons elected Roger II's illegitimate grandson Tancred (c 1130–94) to the throne. His accession was immediately contested by the German (or Swabian) king Henry VI (1165–97), who laid claim to the throne by virtue of his marriage to Roger II's daughter, Constance. At the same time, jealousy and resentment led Tancred's barons to the foolish decision to expel the local Arab population, thus undermining the efficient bureaucracy of the country. And as if all that wasn't enough, King Richard I ('the Lion Heart') was busy sacking Messina on his way to the Third Crusade in 1190.

For an in-depth look at the fascinating reign of one of Europe's greatest kings, pick up Hubert Houben's *Roger II of Sicily: A Ruler Between East and West*, a comprehensive study of the monarchy's cultured court and the elaborate development of royal government.

For something on the history, heraldry, royalty and nobility of southern Italy and Sicily log on to www.regalis.com.

The Normans in Sicily is John Julius Norwich's wonderful romp through the Norman invasions, incorporating the earlier title *Kingdom in the Sun*, a detailed account of the Norman takeover of Sicily.

1072–1101

Sicily's brightest period in history ensues under Roger I, with a cosmopolitan court, reconciliation with the native people and the embracing of several languages. Many significant palaces and churches are built during this time.

1101–30

Roger II takes over after his father's death and builds one of the most efficient civil services in Europe. His court is responsible for the creation of the first written legal code in Sicilian history.

1145

El Idrisi's famous planisphere (a large, silver globe map), the most important medieval geographical work that accurately maps Europe, North Africa and western Asia, is said to have been completed during this year.

1154

William I inherits the kingdom, triggering a power struggle between church and throne. Walter of the Mill is appointed archbishop of Palermo.

1189

William II dies childless and his crown goes to his aunt Constance, wife of Henry VI of Hohenstaufen. Henry VI inherits the German crown of the Holy Roman Empire.

1194–1250

Under Frederick I, Palermo is considered Europe's most important city and Sicily is a key player in Europe. But Frederick imposes heavy taxes and restrictions on free trade, provoking mass rebellion.

Tancred died in 1194, and no sooner had his young son, William III, been installed as king than the Hohenstaufen fleet docked in Messina. On Christmas Day of that year Henry VI declared himself king and young William was imprisoned in the castle at Caltabellotta in southern Sicily, where he eventually died (in 1198).

Wonder of the World

As Holy Roman Emperor, Henry paid scant attention to his Sicilian kingdom, and he died prematurely of malaria in 1197. He was succeeded by his young heir Frederick (1194–1250), known as both Frederick I of Sicily and Frederick II of Hohenstaufen.

Frederick was a keen intellectual with a penchant for political manoeuvring, but he was also a totalitarian despot who fortified the eastern seaboard from Messina to Syracuse and sacked rebellious Catania in 1232. He had issued the antifederal Constitution of Melfi a year earlier, stripping the feudal barons of much of their power in favour of a more centralised authority – his own. He drew up the *Liber Augustales*, which created a unified legal system based on the legal code promulgated by the Roman emperor Augustus 1200 years earlier. This guaranteed certain rights to the citizenry while reinforcing the unquestionable authority of the monarch. He became an avid patron of the arts and the first official champion of vernacular Italian. In the latter years of his reign Frederick became known as *Stupor Mundi*, ‘Wonder of the World’, a none-too-humble recognition of his successful rule. Sicily was now a centralised state and played a key commercial and cultural role in European affairs, and throughout the 13th century Palermo was considered the continent’s most important city.

Yet Frederick’s rule left substantial scars on the island, most notably in the restriction of free trade, the reappearance of massive landed estates, and a heavy tax burden brought on by the pressures of maintaining the empire. Frederick’s death in 1250 left the disaffected barons and their foreign allies, most notably the Pope, in open rebellion against the Hohenstaufens. Frederick’s son Manfred (1231–66) tried desperately to hold on to power, but his rule was seriously challenged when in 1255 the pope surreptitiously offered the throne to Prince Edmund of Lancaster.

THE SICILIAN VESPERS

As Edmund had never stepped onto the island, the French pope Urban IV quite rightly decided that he was not the right man for the job and in 1266 offered the crown to the heartless Charles of Anjou, brother of the French King Louis IX (later St Louis). In 1266 the Angevin army defeated and killed Manfred at Benevento on the Italian mainland. Two years later, another battle took the life of Manfred’s 15-year-old nephew and heir, Conradin, who was publicly beheaded in Naples.

In *Frederick II: A Medieval Emperor* (1988), David Abulafia delves into the life and times of the greatest of the Hohenstaufen rulers of Sicily and finds that he did have chinks in his formidable armour.

In *The Divine Comedy*, Dante devoted an entire canto to the glory of Frederick’s court – to this day Sicilians will insist that the dialect that was the basis for Italian was not Tuscan but Sicilian.

After such a bloody start, the Angevins were hated and feared. Sicily was weighed down by onerous taxes and religious persecution was the order of the day. Norman fiefdoms were removed and awarded to French aristocrats and Sicilian labourers were further oppressed due to their sympathy with the Hohenstaufens.

Regarded as vicious and venal, the French were hated, and with the alleged rape of a local girl by a gang of French troops on Easter Monday 1282 the population of Palermo exploded in rebellion. The peasants lynched every French soldier they could get their hands on. The revolt spread to the countryside and was supported by the barons, who had formed an alliance with pro-imperial Peter of Aragon, who landed at Trapani with a large army and was proclaimed king. For the next 20 years, the Aragonese and the Angevins were engaged in the War of the Sicilian Vespers – a war that was conclusively won by the Spanish, who would remain in power for nearly all of the next 500 years.

FIVE HUNDRED YEARS OF SOLITUDE

The end of the war between the Angevins and Aragonese came with the Peace of Caltabellotta, a treaty signed in 1302. By the end of the 14th century Sicily had been thoroughly marginalised. The eastern Mediterranean was sealed off by the Ottoman Turks, while the Italian mainland was off limits on account of Sicily’s political ties with Spain. As a result the bright light of the Renaissance passed the island by, reinforcing the oppressive effects of poverty and ignorance. Even Spain lost interest in its colony as it turned its attentions away from the Mediterranean to the Atlantic as a preferred channel of trade. After 1458 the Spaniards ruled Sicily through viceroys – the only king to set foot on the island over the next 200 years was Charles V of Germany (a Habsburg), who docked here for a few days in 1535.

By the end of the 15th century Spain had discovered America and was no longer a major participant in the affairs of the Mediterranean. The viceroy’s court was a den of corruption, serving only the interests of the nobility. With the expulsion of Jews from all Spanish territories in 1492, the era of religious tolerance ended. The most influential body on the island became the Catholic Church (whose archbishops and bishops were mostly Spaniards), which exercised draconian powers through a network of Holy Office tribunals, otherwise known as the Inquisition.

Reeling under the weight of natural disaster (see the boxed text, p34) and state oppression, ordinary Sicilians demanded reform. But Spanish monarchs were preoccupied by the wars of the Spanish succession and Sicily was subsequently passed around like an unwanted Christmas present: it was traded between Spain, the House of Savoy (1713) and the Austrian Habsburgs, who then traded it for Sardinia in 1720. The Spanish reclaimed the island in 1734, this time under the Bourbon king Charles I of Sicily (1734–59).

In the 1282 massacre of the Angevins, Sicilians identified their French victims by making them say ‘*cicerì*’ (chickpeas in dialect), a word the French simply could not pronounce.

If you’re Jewish with Sicilian roots, you can now go on a Jewish Heritage Sicily tour – check www.sicilytravel.net/Jewish%20tours.htm.

1226–82

Charles of Anjou is crowned king in 1266. He is ousted in the violent uprising known as the Sicilian Vespers. The war is won by the Spanish, who commence their 500 years in power.

1302

The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies (Sicily and the mainland’s southern part) is divided. The Spaniards take Sicily and the French control the mainland. Ruled by absent Aragonese kings and controlled by barons, the island reverts to a feudal regime.

1487

The end of religious tolerance is cemented by the expulsion of Jews from all Spanish territories. The Spanish Inquisition starts terrorising Sicily. The major cities, particularly Palermo and Messina, become centres of protest and unrest.

1669

The worst eruption in Etna’s history levels Catania and the east-coast towns. It is preceded by a three-day earthquake. The eruption lasts four months, leaving disaster in its wake and 27,000 people homeless.

1806–15

The British occupy Sicily and begin the production of sherry in Marsala. Puppet theatre performances emerge as popular night-time entertainment, particularly in Palermo where more than 25 theatres are chock-a-block with grown men.

1820–60

The first uprising against the Bourbons occurs in Palermo. It is followed by another in Syracuse in 1837 and Palermo in 1848. The revolutionary committees of Palermo give orders for a revolt in April 1860.

NATURAL DISASTERS, POVERTY & PLAGUE

During the Spanish rule, poverty and ignorance were followed by devastating natural disasters. The Sicilian peasantry suffered greatly, and the decimating effect of the Black Death in 1347–48, along with chronic periods of starvation, hastened the descent into a state of desperate poverty. In addition to plagues and cholera, in 1669 Catania was completely destroyed by the biggest eruption in Etna's history. Barely 25 years later most of the cities on the Ionian Coast were wiped out by a massive earthquake that killed more than 5% of the island's population.

Under the reign of Charles I's successor, Ferdinand IV, the landed gentry vetoed any attempts at liberalisation and turned the screws even tighter. Large exports of grain continued to line the pockets of the aristocracy while normal Sicilians died of starvation. During the 17th and 18th centuries it is estimated that at least one-third of the island's common land was appropriated by the nobility.

Exit Feudalism

Although Napoleon never occupied Sicily, his capture of Naples in 1799 forced Ferdinand to move to Sicily. Spanish domination of Sicily was becoming increasingly untenable and Ferdinand's ridiculous tax demands were met with open revolt by the peasantry and the more far-sighted nobles, who believed that the only way to maintain the status quo was to usher in limited reforms. After strong pressure from Lord William Bentinck, commander of the British forces, Ferdinand reluctantly agreed in 1812 to the drawing up of a constitution modelled on the British one. A two-chamber parliament was formed, feudal privileges were abolished, the king was forbidden to enlist foreign troops without the permission of parliament and a court was set up in Palermo that was to be independent of the one in Naples.

At One with Italy

With the final defeat of Napoleon in 1815, Ferdinand once again united Naples and Sicily as the 'Kingdom of the Two Sicilies' and took the title Ferdinand I. But his time was up. For the next 12 years the island was divided between a minority who sought an independent Sicily, and a majority who believed that the island's survival could only be assured as part of a unified Italy.

On 4 April 1860 the revolutionary committees of Palermo gave orders for a revolt against the tottering Bourbon state. The news reached Giuseppe Garibaldi, who decided that this was the perfect moment to begin his war for the unification of Italy. He landed in Marsala on 11 May 1860 with about 1000 soldiers – the famous *mille* – and defeated a Bourbon army of 15,000 at Calatafimi on 15 May, taking Palermo two weeks later.

Under the Bourbons the Sicilian nobility owned 280 of the island's 360 villages.

Garibaldi and his troops arrived at Marsala in two small paddle steamers. They had sailed 960km with no food or water, and no chart or sextant.

Despite the revolutionary fervour, Garibaldi was not a reformer in the social sense, and his soldiers blocked every attempt at a land grab on the part of the ordinary worker. On 21 October a referendum was held that saw Sicily opt for unification with Savoy by a staggering 99%.

FASCISM, CONSERVATISM & WWII

Sicily struggled to adapt to the Piedmontese House of Savoy. Under the new constitution only 1% of the population had the right to vote. The old aristocracy by and large maintained all of their privileges and hopes of social reform soon dwindled. Heavy taxes and military conscription, never before introduced to Sicily, only served to intensify resentment against Savoy.

What the island really needed was a far-reaching policy of agrarian reform, including a redistribution of land. The partial break-up of large estates after the abolition of feudalism still only benefited the *gabelotti* (agricultural middlemen who policed the peasants on behalf of the aristocracy), who leased the land from the owners only to charge prohibitive ground rents to peasants who lived and worked on it. To assist them with their rent collections the bailiffs enlisted the help of local gangs, who then took on the role of intermediary between the tenant and the owner, sorting out disputes and regulating affairs in the absence of an effective judicial system. These individuals were called *mafiosi* and were organised into small territorial gangs drawn up along family lines. They effectively filled the vacuum that existed between the people and the state, comfortably slotting in to the role of local power brokers.

Restlessness for social reform strengthened the growing agrarian trade union known as the *fasci*. Perceiving a very real threat to the status quo, the government imposed martial law on the island in 1894. What was particularly galling to the Sicilians was that the prime minister who made the decision was Francesco Crispi, himself a Sicilian and a one-time leader of the island's independence movement. Crispi sent 15,000 troops to Palermo to suppress any attempt at revolt on the part of the *fasci*. His repressive tactics were followed by an offer of mild reform, but this was discarded by the ruling gentry.

By the turn of the 20th century, Sicily was on its figurative knees. Emigration was draining the island of millions of its inhabitants, and despite localised efforts at land reform the situation was going from bad to worse. In 1908 the Messina earthquake left the city in ruins, 84,000 people dead and tens of thousands of others homeless.

In 1922, Benito Mussolini took power in Rome. With the growing influence of the Mafia dons threatening to jeopardise his dominance in Sicily, Mussolini dispatched Cesare Mori to Palermo with orders to crush lawlessness and insurrection on Sicily. Mori did this by ordering the roundup of individuals suspected of involvement in 'illegal organisations'. For assistance

Gian Carlo Caselli's *A True History of Italy* chronicles the rise of the Mafia and its nefarious influence on the apparatus of state.

1860

1860–94

1897

1922–43

1928

1943–44

Garibaldi lands in Marsala and defeats the Bourbon army, taking Palermo two weeks later. His success at Milazzo completes his victory. The island is free of the Spanish for the first time since 1282.

The emergence of the *mafiosi* fills the vacuum between the people and the state. The need for social reform strengthens the growing trade union, the *fasci*. Feeling threatened, the government imposes martial law on Sicily.

Palermo's famous Teatro Massimo opens, but proceeds to decline soon after. It is re-opened in 1997, after massive renovations and a star performance in *The Godfather*.

Benito Mussolini brings Fascism and almost succeeds in stamping out the Mafia. He drags Sicily into WWII by colonising Libya. Sicily is the springboard for the recapture of Italy and suffers greatly from Allied bombing.

Lava from Etna's eruption wipes out the coastal village of Mascali, together with huge acres of land and 550 buildings. This is the only place to have been destroyed by Etna's eruptions in the 20th century.

The Mafia collaborates with the Allied forces, assisting the capture of the island. Sicily is taken in only 39 days. The Mafia Don Calogero Vizzini is appointed the island's administrator.

with his efforts, Mori drew on the support of the landed gentry, who were rewarded for their help with the reversal of all agrarian reforms achieved in the previous 50 years. The result was simply to drive the movement dangerously underground.

But by the 1930s, Mussolini had bigger fish to fry – his sights were set on the colonisation of Libya as Italy's Fourth Shore, ultimately dragging Sicily into WWII. Chosen as the springboard for the recapture of mainland Italy, Sicily suffered greatly from heavy Allied bombing. Ironically, the war presented the Mafia with the perfect opportunity to get back at Mussolini and it collaborated with the Allied forces (led by US General Patton), assisting the capture of the island in 1943. The fact that Sicily was taken from the Germans in only 39 days was testament to the Mafia's influence in the countryside. After the war, the prisons were emptied of all those unfairly convicted under Fascism, and the Mafia's authority on the island was firmly re-established with the appointment of Mafia Don Calogero Vizzini as the island's administrator.

POSTWAR WOES & MANI PULITE

Following the war Sicily was in a chaotic state. The widespread support for the separatist movement called for a totally independent Sicily, while the Communist Party, which was also extremely active on the island, organised discontented labourers into protest groups that called for radical reforms and a total redistribution of land. The government responded by granting partial autonomy to Sicily in 1946, and while the new status was met with general approval on a bureaucratic level, it did little to resolve the island's age-old problems. The Mafia, freed from the restraints imposed on it by the Fascist regime, was enlisted by the ruling classes to help suppress the spread of left-wing ideologies in the countryside.

The most powerful force in Sicilian politics in the latter half of the 20th century was the Democrazia Cristiana (DC; Christian Democrats), a centre-right Catholic party that appealed to the island's traditional conservatism. Allied closely with the Church, the DC promised wide-ranging reforms while at the same time demanded vigilance against godless communism. It was greatly aided in its efforts by the Mafia, who ensured that the local DC mayor would always top the poll. In return, the system of *clientelismo*, or political patronage, that became a key feature of Sicily's political activities, guaranteed that Mafia business interests would be taken care of through the granting of favourable contracts.

This constant interference by the Mafia in the island's economy did much to nullify the efforts of Rome to reduce the gap between the prosperous north and the poor south. The well-intentioned Cassa del Mezzogiorno (Southern Italy Development Fund), set up in 1950, was aimed at kick-starting the pitiful economy of the south, and Sicily was one of its main beneficiaries,

receiving state and EU money for all kinds of projects. However, the disappearance of large amounts of cash eventually led the central government to scrap the fund in 1992, leaving the island to fend for itself.

In the same year, the huge Tangentopoli (Bribesville) scandal (the institutionalisation of kickbacks and bribes, which had been the country's *modus operandi* since WWII) made headline news. Although largely focused on the industrial north of Italy, the repercussions of the widespread investigation into graft (known as Mani Pulite, or Clean Hands) were inevitably felt in Sicily, a region where politics, business and the Mafia were longtime bed-fellows. The scandal eventually brought about the demise of the DC party, throwing the cosy arrangement between political parties and the Mafia – known as *Il Terzo Livello* (the Third Level) – into disarray, bringing the Italian prime minister, Giulio Andreotti, to trial in Palermo in 1995.

In the meantime, things were changing in regard to how the Sicilians viewed the Mafia, thanks to the investigating magistrates Paolo Borsellino and Giovanni Falcone. They contributed greatly to change the climate of opinion against the Mafia on both sides of the Atlantic, and made it possible for ordinary Sicilians to speak about and against the Mafia more freely. Their tragic murder by huge bombs in the summer of 1992 saw a great loss for Italy and Sicily, but it was these deaths that finally broke the code of silence.

21ST-CENTURY SICILY

Even though today's Sicily is better off than at any other time in its history and seems more a part of mainland politics and a wider European community, it still has enormous economic, social and political hurdles to jump. With unemployment running officially at 20%, but really more like 30% (double the national average) and the average wage only half of that earned north of Florence, Sicily remains one of the poorest Italian regions.

With limited industrial activity and an age-old reliance on agriculture as a source of income, efforts to modernise the island's economy are painfully slow and outside pressures often undermine limited successes.

The election of Romano Prodi in 2006 put a stop to plans to build a bridge over the straits of Messina at a cost of €4 billion, much to the displeasure of Sicily's centre-right regional government, which launched an online poll in early 2007 to see if people wanted the bridge. While they confidently expected the answer to be positive, in the first few days of voting around 55% said 'no'. Prodi has instead redirected the money back into Sicily's infrastructure, which is in great need of a financial boost.

For a devastating insight into the continuing poverty of many 20th-century Sicilian towns you can't do better than Danilo Dolci's book *Sicilian Lives*. Equally fascinating is Jerry Magione's *A Passion for Sicilians*, an account of Dolci's life work.

In 1992 the local police force was so busy chasing *mafiosi* on the run that 7000 Italian troops were dispatched from the mainland to deal with street crime.

For one of the most up-to-date insights into Italy's machinations pick up Tobias Jones' *The Dark Heart of Italy*.

Hooded Easter marchers were outlawed in Corleone in the 1960s to prevent local mobsters from concealing their identity and shooting each other. The ban was lifted in 2007.

1946–50

1951–75

1995–99

2001–04

2006

2007

Partial autonomy is granted to Sicily in 1946, and reforms enforce land redistribution. The Mafia is enlisted to help suppress the spread of left-wing ideologies in the countryside and promote the Christian Democrats.

Sicily's petrochemical industry collapses, the citrus industry implodes and the fishing fleets that provided much of Europe's tinned tuna are diminished. One million Sicilians emigrate to northern Europe in search of a better life.

Giulio Andreotti, the Italian prime minister, is charged with Mafia association, and goes on trial in 1995. He gives nothing away during the four-year proceedings. He is acquitted due to lack of evidence in 1999.

Sicilian voters support Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia party in the 2001 elections. In 2003 Berlusconi stands accused of laundering Mafia money, only to be acquitted in December 2004.

The Sicilian Godfather, Bernardo Provenzano, is arrested after 40 years on the run. His arrest marks an important milestone in the fight against the Mafia.

Provenzano's successor, Salvatore lo Piccolo, is arrested, together with his son Sandro, on the outskirts of Palermo. Despite general optimism, experts warn of ensuing power-grabbing in the wake of the arrests.

The Culture

It's quite likely that you'll come away from your holiday in Sicily with some extra gesticulations and a heightened appreciation for food; you'll also no doubt return with some memories of hairy driving experiences, with Sicilian drivers overtaking at the most impossible of bends and scooters racing past your legs in narrow streets. But, of course, there's a lot more to Sicily than that.

LIFESTYLE

The local stereotype is that Palermo and Catania stand at opposite ends of the island's character. 'In Palermo, we're more traditional, more conservative', says Massimo, a Palermo shopkeeper. 'The Catanians are more outward looking, and better at commerce.' Some ascribe the Palermitans' conservative character to their Arab predecessors, while the Greeks get all the credit for the Catanians' democratic outlook, their sense of commerce and their alleged cunning. Beyond this divide, Sicilians are thought of as conservative and suspicious (usually by mainland Italians), stoical and spiritual, confident, gregarious and sensitive, and as the possessors of a rich and dark sense of humour.

Colonised for centuries, Sicilians have absorbed myriad traits – so much so, indeed, that writer Gesualdo Bufalino believed Sicilians suffered from an 'excess of identity', at the core of which was the islanders' conviction that Sicilian culture stands at the centre of the world. This can feel terribly exclusive to the visitor, and there is still an awful lot of Sicily that is beyond the prying eyes of the tourist. If you're interested in peeking behind the curtains of Sicily's private life, it's best to have some local friends who might invite you to their home and allow you an insight into a part of local life. Who you know makes all the difference, and any invitation to a Sicilian home should be viewed as a real compliment.

That said, it is difficult to make blanket assertions about Sicilian culture, if only because there are huge differences between the more modern-minded city dwellers and those from the traditionally conservative countryside. It is certain, however, that modern attitudes are changing conservative traditions. In the larger university cities such as Palermo, Catania, Syracuse and Messina, you will find a vibrant youth culture and a liberal lifestyle.

Public Stage & Private Theatre

Family is the bedrock of Sicilian life, and loyalty to family and friends is one of the most important qualities you can possess. As Luigi Barzini (1908–84), author of *The Italians*, noted, 'A happy private life helps tolerate an appalling public life.' This chasm between the private arena and public forum is a noticeable aspect of Sicilian life, and has evolved over years of intrusive foreign domination.

Maintaining a *bella figura* (beautiful image) is very important to the average Sicilian, and striving to appear better off than you really are (known as *spagnolismo*) is a regional pastime. Though not confined to Sicily, *spagnolismo* on the island has its roots in the excesses of the Spanish-ruled 18th century, when the race for status was so competitive that the king considered outlawing extravagance. In this climate, how you and your family appeared to the outside world was (and still is) a matter of honour, respectability and pride. In a social context, keeping up appearances extends to dressing well, behaving modestly, performing religious and social duties and fulfilling all

Travellers who want to get in touch with people rather than places should check out the website of www.authenticisicily.com.

Plug in to all things Sicilian at www.sicilianculture.com, which covers everything from news, politics and the economy to language, culture and the arts.

To organise your very own Sicilian wedding in that private villa or aristocratic palazzo, log on to www.weddingsmadeinitaly.co.uk.

BLOG OFF

Want to know what it's like to live in Sicily? Here are some locally generated blogs that'll give you a good insight into how things are on the island right now.

- www.ilgiramondo.net/forum/sicilia – an Italian-language forum with tons of travel discussions
- <http://liberapalermo.blogspot.com> – the Italian-language blog of the anti-Mafia movement; it details the group's daily activities and struggles
- <http://siciliamo.blogspot.com> – has masses of information on Sicily, ranging from recipes to clubs to current affairs
- <http://sicilianodyssey.blogspot.com> – a middle-aged US Navy-based teacher's experience of Sicilian life; it's fascinating, really
- www.sicilyguide.com/blog – great for current affairs and an occasional debate
- <http://sicilytraveller.blogspot.com> – has good stuff on Ragusa and on Sicily in general, with food, drink and travel tips

essential family obligations; in the context of the extended family, where gossip is rife, a good image protects one's privacy.

In this heavily patriarchal society, 'manliness' is a man's prime concern. The main role of the 'head of the family' is to take care of his family, oil the wheels of personal influence and facilitate the upward mobility of family members through a system of influence known as *clientelismo*, which basically allows people to secure jobs, contracts and opportunities through association with the Mafia. Women, on the other hand, are traditionally the repository of the family's honour, and even though unmarried couples commonly live together nowadays, there are still young couples who undertake lengthy engagements for the appearance of respectability.

Traditionally, personal wealth is closely and jealously guarded. Family money can support many individuals, while emigrant remittances have vastly improved the lot of many villagers.

A Woman's Place

'In Sicily, women are more dangerous than shotguns', said Fabrizio Angelo Infanti in *The Godfather*. 'A woman at the window is a woman to be shunned', proclaimed the writer Giovanni Verga in the 19th century. And 'Women are too stupid to be involved in the complex world of finance', decided a judge when faced with a female Mafia suspect in the 1990s. As in many places in the Mediterranean, a woman's position in Sicily has always been a difficult one. Sicilian attitudes towards women have been notoriously conservative, protective and oppressive, and only began to lose currency after the 1980s.

A Sicilian mother and wife commands the utmost respect within the home, and is expected to act as the moral and emotional compass for her family. Although – or perhaps because – male sexuality holds an almost mythical status, women's modesty – which includes being quiet and feminine, staying indoors and remaining a virgin until married – has had to be ferociously guarded. To this day the worst insult that can be directed to a Sicilian man is *cornuto*, meaning that his wife has been unfaithful.

Divorce was legalised in the 1970s, but remains uncommon (usually requiring at least three years of legal wrangling), despite statistics showing that nearly 70% of Sicilian married couples have had extramarital affairs.

But things are changing for Sicilian women. More and more unmarried women live with their partners, especially in the cities, and enjoy the liberal

In order to gain extra subsidies, Sicilian farmers planted their trees in tubs and moved them from field to field as the European Commission counting team advanced.

Despite the landmark decision in 1983 that women were incapable of money laundering, since 1995 over 100 women have been arrested in relation to Mafia crimes.

For a glimpse of the oppressive social scrutiny Sicilian women were subject to not so long ago, watch Giuseppe Tornatore's film *Malena*, which chronicles the tragic tale of a village beauty.

For a humorous insight into the pains of young Sicilians in the 1950s, when divorce was illegal, see *Divorzio all'italiana* (Divorce, Italian Style; 1961), with the excellent Marcello Mastroianni as the unhappy and conniving husband.

lifestyle of many other Western countries. Improvements in educational opportunities and changing attitudes mean that a high proportion of women now have successful careers, although Sicily and Italy have some of the lowest percentages in Europe of women in government.

Boundaries are pushed by Sicily's proactive feminist organisation, Archidonna, which was established in 1986 in order to promote equal opportunities for women. Archidonna champions programmes such as the European Commission's (EC) Mainstreaming programme, which addresses the needs of women entrepreneurs. Women are slowly becoming more active in local politics; for example, Rita Borsellino, the sister of the murdered anti-Mafia judge Paolo Borsellino, has made some serious waves in recent years in the world of politics both by her anti-Mafia efforts, and by the simple virtue of being a woman. In recent years, Archidonna has also started to focus its attention on increasing the presence of women in this arena.

The late legalisation of divorce and the recognition of rape as a crime only in the 1990s reveal just how far women have come in the last couple of decades. Such progress is only emphasised by the publication of novels such as *Volevo i pantaloni* (I Wanted to Wear Trousers; 1989), by Lara Cardella, and the international bestseller *Cento colpi di spazzola prima di andare a dormire* (One Hundred Strokes of the Brush before Bed; 2003), by Melissa Panarello. Cardella's novel, set in 1960s Sicily, deals with the prejudice faced by a young girl who was branded a prostitute because she took the 'revolutionary' step of wearing trousers, while Panarello's book is an account of a teenage girl's sexual experimentation that shocked many Sicilians.

SAINTS & SINNERS

Religion is a big deal in Sicily. With the exception of the small Muslim communities of Palermo and the larger Tunisian Muslim community in Mazara del Vallo, the overwhelming majority of Sicilians consider themselves practising Roman Catholics. Even before the 1929 Lateran Treaty between the Vatican and Italy, when Roman Catholicism became the official religion of the country, Sicily was incontrovertibly Catholic, mostly due to 500 years of Spanish domination. In 1985 the treaty was renegotiated, so that Catholicism was no longer the state religion and religious education was no longer compulsory, but this only reflected the reality of mainland Italy north of Rome; in Sicily, the Catholic Church remains strong and extremely popular.

Pilgrimages remain a central part of the religious ritual, with thousands of Sicilians travelling to places such as the Santuario della Madonna at Tyndaris or the Santuario di Gibilmanna in the Madonie mountains.

In the small communities of the interior you will find that the mix of faith and superstition that for centuries dictated Sicilian behaviour is still strong. The younger, more cosmopolitan sections of society living in the cities tend to dismiss their elders' deepest expressions of religious devotion, but most people still maintain an air of respect.

In churches you are expected to dress modestly. This means no shorts (for men or women) or short skirts, and shoulders should be covered; even churches that are also major tourist attractions, such as the cathedrals at Monreale and Palermo, will often enforce strict dress codes. If you visit a church during a service (which preferably you should refrain from doing), try to be as inconspicuous as possible.

IMMIGRATION & EMIGRATION

Immigration and emigration are among the most pressing contemporary issues, and Sicily is no stranger to the subject. Since the end of the 19th century the island has suffered an enormous drain of human resources through

emigration. Between 1880 and 1910, over 1.5 million Sicilians left for the US, and in 1900 the island was the world's main area of emigration. In the 20th century, tens of thousands of Sicilians moved northwards to work in the factories of Piedmont, Lombardy and further afield in Switzerland and Germany. Even today emigration continues to be a problem, with over 10,000 people leaving the island for greener pastures each year.

This brain-drain epidemic is the result of the grim unemployment rate, which is officially 20% but is really more like 28%. Furthermore, the entrenched system of patronage and nepotism makes it difficult for young people to get well-paid jobs without having the right connections. Finally, Sicily is the one of the favoured ports of call for the thousands of *extracomunitari* (immigrants from outside the EU) who have flooded into Italy. Mazara del Vallo is home to a substantial Tunisian population (around 9000), most of whom work in the fishing industry, while Palermo has a large number of African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants. It's also not unknown for large boats to drop many illegal immigrants off at various locations around Sicily (see p271).

Economically beleaguered, Sicily's young people continue to emigrate while their places are filled by foreign nationals prepared to take the low-paid jobs left behind.

THE MAFIA Origins

The word 'Mafia' took more than 110 years of common usage before it was officially acknowledged as referring to an actual organisation. Although formally recorded by the Palermitan prefecture in 1865, the term was not included in the Italian penal code until 1982.

The origins of the word have been much debated. The author Norman Lewis has suggested that it derives from the Arabic *mu'afah* or 'place of refuge'. Nineteenth-century etymologists proposed *mahjas*, the Arabic word for 'boasting'. Whatever the origin, the term *mafioso* existed long before the organisation known as the Mafia and was used to describe a character that was elegant and proud, with an independent vitality and spirit.

The concept of the *mafioso* goes all the way back to the late 15th century when the restricted commercial opportunities were so stifling that even the overprivileged feudal nobles were forced to make changes in order to survive. They introduced a policy of resettlement that forced thousands of farmers off the land and into new towns; the idea was to streamline crop growth, but it also destroyed the lives of the peasants in the process. Many of the aristocrats moved to big cities such as Palermo and Messina, leaving their estates in the hands of *gabellotti* (bailiffs), who were charged with collecting ground rents. They, in turn, employed the early *mafiosi* – who were small gangs of armed peasants – to help them solve any 'problems' that came up on the way. The *mafiosi* were soon robbing large estates and generally causing mayhem, but the local authorities were inept at dealing with them as they would quickly disappear into the brush.

The bandits struck a mixture of fear and admiration into the peasantry, who were happy to support any efforts to destabilise the feudal system. The peasants became willing accomplices in protecting the outlaws, and although it would be another 400 years before crime became 'organised', the 16th and 17th centuries witnessed a substantial increase in the activities of brigand bands. The bands were referred to as Mafia, while the peasants' loyalty to their own people resulted in the name Cosa Nostra (Our Thing). The early-day Mafia's way of protecting itself from prosecution was to become the modern Mafia's most important weapon: the code of silence.

Five million Sicilians live outside Italy and 18 million Italians of Sicilian origin live in the US, but the current population of the island is only five million.

The demanding responsibilities of farm life and the effects of modernity on an age-old agricultural system are the substance of *On Persephone's Island*, Mary Taylor Simeti's fascinating account of her life in Sicily.

Peter Robb's *Midnight in Sicily* (1998) is an immensely enjoyable treatise on the four pillars of Sicilian society: art, culture, food and the Mafia.

THE 10 COMMANDMENTS OF A MAFIOSO

The Mafia is said to be a God-fearing organisation, a claim which seems ludicrous considering its activities break most biblical rules – its disregard for life, and other people's property and personal freedom, for example. But the recent arrest of Salvatore lo Piccolo, the Cosa Nostra's top boss, unearthed a list of 10 rules for a *mafioso* that has ironically been compared to the Bible's own commandments.

- No-one can present himself directly to another of our friends. There must be a third person to do it.
- Never look at the wives of friends.
- Never be seen with cops.
- Don't go to pubs and clubs.
- Always being available for Cosa Nostra is a duty – even if your wife's about to give birth.
- Appointments must absolutely be respected.
- Wives must be treated with respect.
- When asked for any information, the answer must be the truth.
- Money cannot be appropriated if it belongs to others or to other families.
- People who can't be part of Cosa Nostra: anyone who has a close relative in the police, anyone with a two-timing relative in the family, anyone who behaves badly and doesn't hold to moral values.

The 'New' Mafia

Up until WWII the Mafia had operated almost exclusively in the countryside, but with the end of the conflict Cosa Nostra began its expansion into the cities. It took over the construction industry, channelling funds into its bank accounts and creating a network of kickbacks that were factored into every project undertaken. In 1953, a one-off meeting between representatives of the US and Sicilian Mafias resulted in the creation of the first Sicilian Commission, which had representatives of the six main Mafia families (or *cosche*, literally meaning 'artichoke') to efficiently run its next expansion into the extremely lucrative world of narcotics. At the head of the commission was Luciano Liggio from Corleone, whose 'family' had played a vital role in developing US-Sicilian relations.

Throughout the 1960s and '70s the Mafia earned billions of dollars from the drug trade. Inevitably, the raised stakes made the different Mafia families greedy for a greater share and from the late 1960s onwards Sicily was awash with vicious feuds that left hundreds dead.

The most sensational assassination was that of the chief prefect of police, General Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa, who was ambushed in the heart of Palermo in 1982; his brutal murder led to prosecutors and magistrates being granted wider powers of investigation.

The first real insight into the 'New Mafia' came with the arrest of *mafioso* Tommaso Buscetta, also in 1982. After nearly four years of interrogation, headed by the courageous Palermitan magistrate Giovanni Falcone, Buscetta broke the code of silence. His revelations shocked and fascinated the Italian nation, as he revealed the innermost workings of La Società Onorata (the Honoured Society; the Mafia's chosen name for itself).

In 1986, 500 top *mafiosi* were put on trial in the first *maxiprocesso* (super-trial) in a specially constructed bunker near Palermo's Ucciardone prison. The trial resulted in 347 convictions, of which 19 were life imprisonments and the others jail terms totalling a staggering 2665 years.

Well into the 1970s, *delitto d'onore* (honour killings) were considered acceptable and were punished with only light prison sentences ranging from three to seven years.

Perhaps the most significant development in the fight against the Mafia was the change in the attitude of ordinary people. Angered and disgusted by the tidal wave of savage murders, people began to speak out against organised crime. For more information on the anti-Mafia movement, see below.

Finally in January 1993, the authorities arrested the infamous *capo di tutti capi* (boss of bosses), Totò Riina, the most wanted man in Europe. He was charged with a host of murders, including those of the anti-Mafia magistrates Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino, and sentenced to life imprisonment.

The Anti-Mafia Movement

The anti-Mafia movement is alive and kicking in Sicily, tracing its roots back to the beginning of today's Mafia. According to historians, the movement first appeared in the late 19th century, and lasted in its first incarnation until the 1950s. The movement strove for agrarian reform, targeting the Mafia, conservative political elites and the *latifondisti* (big landowners), but its efforts were shattered when the lack of economic prospects in the postwar era drove thousands of young Sicilians to emigrate in search of work and a better life.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the anti-Mafia movement was headed by political radicals, mainly members of the left-wing groups disenchanted with the Socialist and Communist parties. Giuseppe 'Peppino' Impastato became famous during this period; the son of a *mafioso*, Impastato mocked individual *mafiosi* on his popular underground radio show. He was assassinated in 1978 and was subsequently the subject of the film *I cento passi* (One Hundred Steps; 2000). Things were at their worst for the anti-Mafia movement in the 1980s, when the Mafia was particularly intolerant of anyone perceived as a potential threat. The assassination in 1982 of General Carlo Alberto Dalla Chiesa, whom the national government had sent to Sicily to direct anti-Mafia activities, is now seen as one of the major elements in sparking a new wave in the anti-Mafia movement, with groups ranging from educators and students to political activists and parish priests becoming involved.

The reformist Christian Democrat Leoluca Orlando, who was elected mayor of Palermo during the 1980s, also helped to increase anti-Mafia sentiment. He led an alliance of left-wing movements and parties to create Palermo Spring, which invalidated the public-sector contracts previously given to Mafia families, restored and reopened public buildings, and aided in the arrests of leading *mafiosi*. During the 1990s, Orlando left the Christian Democrats and set up the anticorruption movement, La Rete (the Network), bringing together a broad collection of anti-Mafia individuals and reform organisations. Some reformers have criticised Orlando, however, for having left office without establishing structures and institutions to continue his work.

Civilian efforts saw housewives hanging sheets daubed with anti-Mafia slogans from their windows, shopkeepers and small entrepreneurs forming associations to oppose extortion, and the formation of groups such as Libera (www.libera.it), cofounded in 1994 by Rita Borsellino, the sister of the murdered judge Paolo Borsellino. Libera managed to get the Italian parliament to permit its member organisations to legally acquire properties that had been seized from the Mafia by the government, establishing agricultural co-operatives and other legitimate enterprises on these lands. Even the Catholic Church, long silent on the Mafia's crimes, finally began to have outspoken anti-Mafia members. The best known was Giuseppe Puglisi, who organised local residents to oppose the Mafia, and who was shot in 1993.

At the time of writing, Sicily's social attitudes were continuing to change: in Gela, the town's remarkable mayor, Enzo Crocetta – an openly

For an authoritative and comprehensive insight into the history, structure and traditions of the Sicilian Mafia, look no further than Claire Sterling's *Octopus: The Long Reach of the Sicilian Mafia*.

A Mafia boss, killed in a December 2007 police shoot-out, was found with three *pizzini* (secret messages) in his windpipe and three in his stomach. The police didn't reveal whether the messages were legible or not.

Recent works on the Mafia, such as Norman Lewis' *In Sicily* (2000) and Alexander Stille's *Excellent Cadavers* (1995), have reported the presence of a new organisation composed of *mafiosi* who left Cosa Nostra during the turbulent 1980s.

Head to www.bestofsicily.com to continue exploring the issues that are meaningful to Sicilians.

gay, communist and Catholic anti-Mafia activist – was re-elected for a second term, while Mafia-connected individuals were fired from government jobs in what the Italian daily *La Repubblica* described as ‘a small Sicilian miracle’.

For an interview with Catania’s anti-Mafia campaigners, see p164.

The Mafia Today

Since Riina’s conviction, other top *mafiosi* have followed him behind bars, most notably his successor Leoluca Bagarella, arrested in 1995, and the vicious killer Giovanni Brusca, arrested in 1996. In 1998 top bosses Vito Vitale and Mariano Troia were arrested and prosecuted, as well as Mafia accountant Natale d’Emmanuele. In 2003 Salvatore Sciarabba – right-hand man to Mafia boss Bernardo Provenzano – was arrested in the heart of Palermo. Provenzano was arrested in 2006, followed by the arrest of his successor, Salvatore lo Piccolo in 2007. No-one would be so foolish to suggest that the power of the Mafia is a thing of the past, but these arrests have meant that the powerful core of the organisation is being weakened.

Despite the arrests, Mafia experts warn that the battle is not over. According to Leoluca Orlando, Palermo’s former mayor, the arrests of the big bosses have only cleared the path for other criminal organisations to muscle in. He particularly warned of the ‘Americans’ – the Mafia members pushed off the island by the Corleone gang during the 1980s Mafia wars – who might come back to seize control.

Today’s Mafia has infiltrated daily life, becoming intertwined with legal society: its collaborators and their children are now ‘respectable’ and influential citizens. Whether it’s recovering stolen property or getting a permit, the Mafia still has a hand in it; for example, a legitimate business might secure a building contract, but the Mafia will then tell it where to buy cement or where to hire machinery. Palermo’s chief prosecutor calls it ‘the Invisible Mafia’, and points out that a large number of Palermo’s shopkeepers still pay some kind of *pizzo* (protection money). It’s hardly surprising that the Eurispes think-tank in Rome estimated the Mafia’s (including the branches in Calabria, Campania and Puglia) 2004 profits at €123 billion, 10% of national GDP.

A bright note is the significant anti-*pizzo* efforts in Palermo, such as the 2004 campaign called Addiopizzo, enlisting around 209 businesses that signed a pledge not to pay the *pizzo* and whose names are listed on the group’s website (www.addiopizzo.org).

The future of Sicily and the Mafia is full of daunting challenges, thanks to the fact that the Mafia’s involvement in the economic, political, and social life of the island is longstanding and deeply entrenched. But considering the arrests that took place in 2006 and 2007, it is clear that much has changed, and thankfully for the better.

Around 150 students ‘exorcised’ the spirit of Mafia boss Bernardo Provenzano from the town of Corleone by staging a ‘freedom marathon’ down the dirt track leading to Provenzano’s former hiding place.

Such is the resistance in Sicily to wearing a helmet on a bike or scooter, in summer 2007 a traffic police officer fined a motorcycle police officer for not wearing a helmet.

© Lonely Planet Publications. To make it easier for you to use, access to this chapter is not digitally restricted. In return, we think it’s fair to ask you to use it for personal, non-commercial purposes only. In other words, please don’t upload this chapter to a peer-to-peer site, mass email it to everyone you know, or resell it. See the terms and conditions on our site for a longer way of saying the above - ‘Do the right thing with our content.’

Food & Wine

'Leave the gun. Take the *cannoli*.' Sicily's food is so good that even the mobsters in *The Godfather* turned to it for comfort. And indeed, in a nation where food is at the centre of existence, the cuisine of Sicily is respected as one of the most exciting and exotic, but also as one of the most traditional. A huge part of anyone's visit to this gorgeous island will be taken up with eating, and with learning the many unwritten (and written) rules of eating the Sicilian way – understanding the strict order of the dining ritual, matching tastes and preparation methods, choosing the right dessert, having the right coffee. But the task should be immensely enjoyable: Sicily's kitchen is packed with fresh ingredients, shiny fish straight out of the Mediterranean, unusual additions such as almonds and pistachios, and delectable combinations such as pasta with sardines, saffron and sultanas.

Traditional recipes have survived here for centuries, and Sicily's rich pantry was filled over a long period. The abundance of fruit and vegetables has been evident since the times of the ancient Greeks – Homer famously said of the island, 'Here luxuriant trees are always in their prime, pomegranates and pears, and apples glowing red, succulent figs and olives swelling sleek and dark', and wrote about wild fennel and caper bushes growing on the hills. But it wasn't until the Arabs came to the island that the cuisine really took shape. The Saracens brought the ever present aubergine, as well as the citruses, and they are believed to have introduced pasta to the island (rather than Marco Polo bringing noodles from China). They also spiced up the dishes with saffron and sultanas, and contrasted the dishes' delicate flavours with the crunch of almonds and pistachios. In fact, the Arabs were so influential that couscous is present on every menu in western Sicily; *arancini* (deep-fried rice balls) are another staple contributed by the Arabs. And, on top of this, the Saracens brought sugar cane to Sicily, helping it develop all those fantastic sweets; the classic *cassata* comes from the Arabic word *qas'ah*, referring to the terracotta bowl used to shape the cake.

What's really impressive about Sicily's cuisine is that most of these amazing tastes came out of poverty and depredation. The extravagant recipes of the *monsù* (chefs; from the French *monsieur le chef*) employed by the island's aristocrats were adapted to fit the budget and means of the less fortunate. Ordinary Sicilians applied the principal of preserving the freshness of the ingredients, and most importantly, never letting one taste overpower another. And that's the crunch of it, so to speak, the key to all of Sicily's dishes: simplicity. Prepare to have your taste buds educated, converted and pampered.

For more information on food and drink in Sicily, see p286.

The first cookery book of the Western world, *The Art of Cooking* was written by Mithaecus in Syracuse in the 5th century BC.

BREAKFAST, LUNCH & DINNER

Sicilians rarely eat a sit-down *colazione* (breakfast); instead they drink a cappuccino and eat a *cornetto* (Italian croissant) while standing at a bar. Cappuccinos or caffè lattes are only drunk for breakfast.

Pranzo (lunch) is traditionally the main meal of the day and most businesses close for several hours every afternoon. Lunch consists of an antipasto, a *primo piatto* (first course) of pasta or risotto, and a *secondo piatto* (second course) of meat or fish. It's rounded off with fresh fruit or *dolci* (dessert), and coffee, often on the way back to work.

Cena (dinner) is eaten late, with many restaurants getting started between 9pm and 10pm. The evening meal used to be simpler, but habits have changed due to the inconvenience of travelling home for lunch every day. Many Sicilians eat out on Fridays and Saturdays, and an increasing number have Sunday lunches in restaurants.

THREE COLOURS

Sicily's favourite ingredients can be grouped according to the *tricolore* – the three colours of the Italian flag. The following are the basics that will be found in the pantry of any Sicilian; through these you can get to the core of the island's cuisine.

Red

You may think red is the colour of passion, but when it comes to Sicilian cooking, it's also the colour of the most important ingredient of all: the tomato. *Il pomodoro* or *il pomodorino* (cherry tomato) is at the foundation of most sauces, whether it's cooked, blanched or simply scattered fresh over a heap of pasta. Sicilian tomatoes are renowned throughout Italy for their sweet flavour and you'll often see tomatoes hanging in bunches outside the houses (especially on the island of Salina) where the locals claim it's the best way to keep them fresh. Sun-dried tomatoes are another way of preserving tomatoes, and many Sicilians use this version in the winter months, when fresh tomatoes aren't easy to find.

Peppers are another must-have vegetable for Sicilians, and you'll find both the bell-shaped version and the long, pointy type in many starters and antipasti. A favourite dish involving red, green and yellow peppers is *peperonata in agridolce*, where peppers are stewed with onions, pine nuts, raisins and capers.

White

Garlic is, of course, a major ingredient in Sicilian cooking. It is added to around 80% of savoury recipes, and it sometimes forms the main component of a sauce, as in *spaghetti aglio olio* (spaghetti with garlic and oil) – simple and delicious. Sicilians use crushed fresh cloves, most commonly on grilled or baked fish, or fry it thinly sliced to flavour the oil.

'White' is also for cheese. Sicilians like to sprinkle liberal helpings of a strong cheese called *caciocavallo* on their pasta dishes (despite the word

The Slow Food Movement (symbolised by a snail) champions traditional cuisine and sustainable agricultural practices. Log on to www.slowfood.com for the best places to eat and drink.

The story goes that Sicilians, delighted by the beauty of Bellini's opera *Norma*, started using the superlative *una vera Norma* (a real Norma). When the author Nino Martoglio tasted the pasta dish, he found it so ravishing he called it *pasta alla Norma*.

HOW TO WIN FRIENDS & INFLUENCE PEOPLE (PART ONE)

Sicily's *pasta a picchi pacchiu* (spaghetti with tomato and chilli sauce) is mind-blowingly good, and it's available on virtually every Sicilian menu. It is unlikely you'll eat a better version of this simplest of pasta dishes anywhere else – and if you cook it at home, all your friends will love you. This is how to make it (enough for two, maybe three people):

250g to 300g spaghetti
6 to 7 large juicy, ripe tomatoes
8 garlic cloves, thinly sliced
12 fresh basil leaves, ripped up
½ cup olive oil
1 tbsp salt
1 tbsp ground black pepper
A sprinkling of chilli flakes

Blanch the tomatoes in boiling water for no more than a minute. Peel and crush them, then place them (and all the lovely juices) in a bowl.

Boil water for spaghetti and cook as per the instructions on the packet. Remember to give the pasta plenty of water to 'breathe', and to always salt the water well.

Pour the olive oil into a pan and, when it has heated, add the garlic and chilli. Keep stirring until the garlic is golden. Add garlic and oil to the tomatoes and stir well, then sprinkle the roughly ripped basil, salt and pepper on top, stirring once again. Drain the pasta and pour into the sauce, mixing well together. Add fresh olive oil to taste.

cavallo, which means 'horse', the cheese is actually made from cow's milk). Parmesan has only recently found its way onto the menu, and Sicilians will shriek with horror if you sprinkle it on the wrong sauce. Ricotta cheese, both dried and fresh, often features on Sicilian menus – along with aubergines and tomatoes, it's one of the main ingredients in *pasta alla Norma*. If you can find it really fresh (as in 24 hours old), it tastes like heaven. *Pecorino* cheese is another favourite. Made of sheep's milk, it has a strong aroma and is often added to sauces.

Mandorle (almonds) usually come blanched. They are widely cultivated throughout Sicily and they add a wonderful crunch to many a dish, such as *pasta Trapanese*, where they are crushed and added to the tomato and basil sauce. Almonds are also used to make one of the most common *granite* (flavoured crushed ice), as well as wonderful cookies. The Sicilians have invented *latte di mandorla*, a delicious cold drink that is basically almond pulp and water; it is drunk mostly in the west, where you can also buy it in supermarkets, and it's freshly made in many bars.

Green

Which should go first? Olive oil? Basil? Pistachios?

Good olive oil is one of the prime delicacies of Sicilian cuisine, and several traditional olive varieties have been grown on the island for centuries. The main types are *biancolilla* (southwestern Sicily), *nocellara* and *ogliarola messinese* (northeast), *cerasuola* (between Sciacca and Paceco) and *nocellara del Belice* (Trapani province). Titone oil, produced by a family-run refinery near Marsala, is considered to be one of Sicily's best olive oils. An organic oil made from 50% *nocellara* olives, 25% *biancolilla* olives and 25% *cerasuola* olives, it has an exquisite taste and keeps its freshness for a long time after bottling. Needless to say, you won't cook with this oil, but instead cherish every drop.

Next onto *basilico* (basil), the 'king of herbs', whose smell you'll detect wafting from most Sicilian kitchens. While the herb is used in northern Italy mainly for making pesto, the Sicilians have taken this a step further, making *pesto alla Trapanese* with its fragrant leaves. In this dish, basil is combined with blanched and peeled tomatoes, grated *pecorino* cheese, a healthy clove or two of garlic and some crushed almonds. The ingredients are bashed together with a pestle and mortar, some good olive oil is added, and the sauce is mixed with short pasta. It's hard to describe how good this sauce is – and the scent of basil is essential (as is good olive oil).

Pistachios are a big deal in Sicily. Brought to Sicily by the Arabs and cultivated on the fertile volcanic-soil plains of the island, the nut is used in both savoury and sweet recipes – some of the best ice cream is made from pistachios. And the good news is that, if eaten regularly, the pistachio can significantly reduce cholesterol (although that unfortunately does not apply to the ice cream). There's an entire festival dedicated to the green nut in the town of Bronte from 29 September to 7 October; it is held every other year (the 15th and 16th festivals are scheduled for 2009 and 2011, respectively) because it takes two years to produce a harvest of pistachios.

STAPLES

Bread, pasta, antipasti, fish, meat... with so many delicious staples in Sicilian cuisine, you'll be spoiled for choice.

Bread

Through the island's plagues and power struggles, bread has always been a staple food for the Sicilian peasant. Made from durum wheat, Sicilian

A wonderful website is www.innamaskitchen.com, with reams of 'real' recipes, all from a mother's kitchen. Sicilian food is amply represented and membership is free.

Pistachio nuts are highly flammable in large quantities, and are prone to self heating and spontaneous combustion.

Marrying into a Sicilian family, American-born Mary Taylor Simeci set about learning the history and folklore of the island's food. The result is the fascinating and practical *Sicilian Food*, full of recipes and romantic history.

bread is coarse and golden, fashioned into a myriad ritualistic and regional shapes from braids to rings to flower shapes. Baked bread is treated with the greatest respect and in the past only the head of the family had the privilege of slicing the loaf.

Periods of dire poverty and starvation no doubt gave rise to the common use of breadcrumbs, which served to stretch meagre ingredients and fill up hungry stomachs. Such economy lives on in famous dishes such as *involtini*, in which slices of meat or fish are wrapped around a sometimes-spicy breadcrumb stuffing. Some other popular dishes made with a bread-dough base include *sfincione*, *impanata* and *scaccie* (see Sicilian Street Food, p51).

Pasta

According to the British *Guardian* newspaper, a poll conducted in 2007 found that almost 50% of Italians preferred a good plate of pasta to sex. Perhaps some will be surprised to hear this, considering the Italians' often flaunted virility, but the fact remains that, aside from Dolce & Gabbana, pasta is Italy's (and Sicily's) most famous export. While fresh pasta is now common on most Sicilian restaurant menus, it is dry pasta that has always been the staple of Sicily and southern Italy – mainly because dry pasta is more economical. But dry pasta may not be the poor man's staple for much longer: the 2007 Italy-wide pasta boycott was triggered by a massive rise in wheat prices, which increased by 20% in only two months.

The most famous of all Sicilian pasta dishes is *pasta con le sarde* (pasta with sardines). It is a heavy dish, but the liberal use of wild mountain fennel (unique to Sicily), onions, pine nuts and raisins give the sardines a

John Dickie's *Delizia! The Epic History of the Italians and their Food* explores Italian (and Sicilian) history through foodie moments and claims that the best food in Italy came from the cities, not the countryside.

In 15th- and 16th-century Palermo, pasta cost three times as much as bread and was a dish confined to the aristocracy.

HOW TO WIN FRIENDS & INFLUENCE PEOPLE (PART TWO)

There's nothing that can add flavour and edge to a dish like a good aubergine. The Sicilians know this well, and the aubergine occupies a mighty place in Mediterranean cuisine. Bitter at first, the aubergine takes on and balances out heavy aromas and flavours while keeping its own in the process. One of the most famous Sicilian aubergine recipes is *pasta alla Norma*; here's how to make it (for four people):

450g to 500g penne
 3 aubergines, finely sliced, salted and left to rest for an hour
 8 large ripe tomatoes
 1 onion
 2 cloves of garlic
 coarse salt
 flour
 olive oil
 6 to 10 basil leaves
 200g crumbled *ricotta salata* (salted ricotta)

Blanch the tomatoes in boiling water for a minute, then peel and slice into a mushy mass. Meanwhile, sauté an onion and two cloves of garlic in 2 tbsp of olive oil until the onion is sweet smelling. Add the tomatoes, a pinch of salt and freshly ground pepper, and cook until the sauce is nice and thick (around 20 minutes).

Rinse and dry the aubergines, then cover them lightly in flour. Heat oil in another pan, throw the aubergines in, then cook them for a few minutes on each side until they are soft and golden.

Cook the pasta and toss it with fresh olive oil in a large bowl. Add the ricotta, mix well, and add the tomato sauce, placing the aubergines on top. Cover with torn basil leaves. Chew and think of Sicily.

wonderfully exotic flavour. Other famous dishes include Catania's *pasta alla Norma*, with its rich combination of tomatoes, aubergines and salted ricotta. In the interior you will find meat (mostly mutton and beef) and cheese sauces. Baroque Modica is where the island's best lasagne (*lasagne cacate*) is made; in this version, two kinds of cheese – ricotta and *pecorino* – are added to minced beef and sausage, and spread between layers of home-made pasta squares.

Antipasti

Sicilians aren't big on antipasti (literally 'before pasta'), but their love of strong flavours and unusual combinations lends itself well to the antipasto platter. It is a great way to explore some of the wonderful Sicilian flavours, ranging from marinated sardines and slivers of raw herring to fruity cheeses and a whole range of marinated, baked and fresh vegetables, the most famous of which is *caponata* (a combination of tomatoes, aubergines, olives and anchovies).

Fish

The extensive development of fishing and – until recent years – the widespread presence of fish such as sardines, tuna and mackerel off the island's shores have ensured that fish is a staple food.

A Palermitan favourite is *sarde a beccafico alla Palermitana* (sardines stuffed with anchovies, pine nuts, currants and parsley). However, the filet mignon of the marine world is the *pesce spada* (swordfish), served either grilled with lemon, olive oil and oregano, or as *involtini* (slices of swordfish rolled around a spicy filling of onions and breadcrumbs).

The best swordfish is caught in Messina, where they serve the classic *agghiotta di pesce spada* (also called *pesce spada alla Messinese*), a mouth-watering dish flavoured with pine nuts, sultanas, garlic, basil and tomatoes. The Egadi Islands are home to two splendid fish dishes, *tonno 'nfurnatu* (oven-baked tuna with tomatoes, capers and green olives) and *alalunga di Favignana al ragù* (fried albacore served in a spicy sauce of tomatoes, red chilli peppers and garlic); it is not uncommon to see the sauce of the latter dish appear as part of your pasta dish. Finally, a popular food throughout the island is calamari or *calamaretti* (baby squid), which is prepared in a variety of ways, including stuffed, fried, or cooked in a tomato sauce.

Meat

Although you can find a limited number of meat dishes along the coast, you won't taste the best until you move further inland. The province of Ragusa is renowned for its imaginative and varied uses of meat, particularly mutton, beef, pork and rabbit. Its most famous dish is *falsomagro*, a stuffed roll of minced beef, sausages, bacon, egg and *pecorino* cheese. Another local speciality is *coniglio all'agrodolce* (sweet-and-sour rabbit), which is marinated in a sauce of red wine flavoured with onions, olive oil, bay leaves and rosemary. In the Madonie mountains, the town of Castelbuono is the home of *capretto in umido* (stewed kid) and *agnello al forno alla Madonita* (Madonie-style roast lamb). The latter is left to soak in a marinade of oil, lemon juice, garlic, onion and rosemary, which gives the meat a particularly delicious flavour. Goat and kid dishes will often appear on the menu as *castrato* – don't be put off! It means the goat was castrated, giving the meat a tender quality. Thankfully, it doesn't refer to what's on your plate.

Travel around Sicily in your kitchen by preparing the specialities from Clarissa Hyman's *Cucina Siciliana*. Recipes are organised by time of the day and there are wonderful insights into the island's pasta, cheese, olive oil and nut producers.

To eat your way around some of the island's most productive farms, head to www.agriturismo-sicilia.it.

FOOD PARTIES

The sharing of food is a central feature of all the most important social occasions, and the Sicilian calendar is dotted with *sagra* (festivals usually dedicated to one culinary item or theme). The classic way to celebrate a feast day is to precede it with a day of eating *magro* (lean), because the feast day is usually a day of overindulgence. The general rule is that a *sagra* will offer food, although you'll normally be expected to pay, while at a *fešta* (festival) you may have to bring your own. Here's a list of some of the most famous food festivals:

- Sagra del Mandorlo in Fiore (Festival of the Almond Blossom) – held in Agrigento (p265) on the first Sunday in February
- Festival Internazionale del Cuscus (International Couscous Festival) – held in San Vito Lo Capo (p105) every September
- Sagra del Miele (Honey Festival) – held in Sortino, located between Catania and Syracuse, at the end of September
- Festival of the Pistachio Nut – held in Bronte from 29 September to 7 October every odd year
- Zafferanea Etna Food Festival (Ottobrata) – held in Zafferanea Etna in October

However, the biggest Sicilian festivals centre on Carnevale (carnival period between Epiphany and Lent), Pasqua (Easter), Natale (Christmas) and the celebration of saints' days such as Santa Lucia in Syracuse, Sant'Agata in Catania and Santa Rosalia in Palermo.

Sweet Tooth

Sicily's extraordinary pastries are rich in colour and elaborately designed. The queen of Sicilian desserts, the *cassata* is made with ricotta, sugar, vanilla, diced chocolate and candied fruits; in Palermo, they describe a woman as 'lovely as a *cassata*'. In the west you can find *cuccia*, an Arab cake made with grain, honey and ricotta. Most people will have heard of the famous *cannoli*, pastry tubes filled with sweetened ricotta and sometimes candied fruit or chocolate pieces. Also look out for *pasta di mandorle* (almond cookies) and *pasta paradiso* (melting moments).

Other Sicilian sweets to try are *gelso di mellone* (watermelon jelly), *buccellati* (little pies filled with minced fruit), *pupe* (sugar dolls made to celebrate Ognissanti on 1 November), *ucchiuzzi* (biscuits shaped like eyes, made for the Festa di Santa Lucia on 13 December) and *biscotti regina* (sesame-coated biscuits).

If you are in Palermo around late October, before the festival of Ognissanti (All Souls' Day), you will see plenty of stalls selling the famous *frutti della Martorana*, named after the church that first began producing them. These almond-paste biscuits, shaped to resemble fruits (or whatever takes the creator's fancy), are part of a Sicilian tradition that dates back to the Middle Ages.

Any decent *pasticceria* (pastry shop) will have an enormous spread of freshly made cakes and pastries. It is very common for Sicilians to have their meal in a restaurant and then go to a pastry shop, where they have a coffee and cake while standing at the bar.

Gelati & Granite

Despite Etna's belly of fire its peak is a natural freezer, and snow that falls on Etna lasts well into the searing summer, insulated by a fine blanket of volcanic ash. The Romans and Greeks treasured the snow, with which they used to chill their wine, but it was the Arabs who first started the Sicilian mania for all things icy – *granita* (flavoured crushed ice), *cassata* ice cream, *gelato* (ice cream) and *semifreddo* (literally 'semifrozen'; a cold, creamy dessert).

The origins of ice cream lie in the Arab *sarbat* (sherbet), a concoction of sweet fruit syrups chilled with iced water, which was then developed into *granita* (where crushed ice was mixed with fruit juice, coffee, almond milk and so on) and *cremolata* (fruit syrups chilled with iced milk) and from there to *gelato*, which in Sicily is made with blancmange instead of cream.

The modern manifestation of ice cream – almost-solid pieces of flavoured, iced cream – did not appear until the 18th century. All over Sicily, ice cream is still made at the cafés and bars that sell it, and it is truly delicious, with constant innovations in flavours. Try it like a Sicilian – first thing in the morning in a brioche!

Granite are sometimes topped with fresh whipped cream, and are often eaten with a brioche. Favourite flavours include coffee and almond, though lemon is great in summer. During July, August and September, try a *granita di gelsi* (mulberry), a delicious seasonal offering.

WINE

Sicily's vineyards are massive – nearly 290,000 acres – and cover a greater area than that of the vineyards of both Bordeaux and Chile. And while grapes have always been a big feature of the Sicilian economy, Sicilian wine is not well known. Traditionally, the heavy flavour was sold as a base to strengthen many French labels, but Sicilian wine is now elbowing its own way onto the table, with white wines fermented at cool, mountain temperatures taking the lead. Whites tend to be light, dry and floral, while reds are heavy and fruity.

The most renowned winery is the Regaleali estate in Caltanissetta province, owned by the Conte Tasca family since 1834. The best of the estate's wines are the Nozze d'Oro (a refined white made to mark the count's 50th wedding anniversary in 1985) and the Rosso del Conte, an intense, full-bodied red.

The wine you'll see on most menus, however, is the Corvo di Salaparuta, a velvety red that is an ideal companion to meaty *falsomagro*. The estate's whites (made with one of the island's best grapes, *inzolia*) are usually quite fresh and slightly fruity; Corvo Bianco is an excellent and reasonably priced drinking wine.

Rapitalà in Alcamo produces the island's most popular white wine, a soft, neutral white that goes well with most white-fish dishes. The estates around Alcamo also hold a *denominazione di origine controllata* (DOC; see p52).

SICILIAN STREET FOOD

Boy, do these people know how to eat. They're at it all the time, when they're shopping, on the way to work, on the way home from work, when they're discussing business, or any other time of the day. What they're enjoying are the *buffitieri* – little hot snacks, which you'll find at stalls and are meant to be eaten on the spot. You should give it a go.

Kick off the morning with a *pane e pannelle*, Palermo's famous chickpea fritters. Or you might want to go for the potato croquettes, the *sfinzione* (a spongy, oily pizza topped with onions and *caciocavallo* cheese) or even *scaccie* (discs of bread dough spread with a filling and rolled up into a pancake). In summer, people have a freshly baked brioche filled with *gelato* (ice cream) flavoured with fruits, coffee or nougat.

From 4pm onwards you can pick up some barbecued offal, such as *stigghiola* (goat intestines filled with onions, cheese and parsley) or the Palermo favourite, *frittelle* (soup made from meat, marrow and fat). In Catania you can buy all manner of *impanata* (bread-dough snacks) stuffed with meat, vegetables or cheese, as well as *arancini* (deep-fried rice balls).

Another famous street snack is *pani cu'la mensa*, which comes as *schietta o maritata* (literally, 'single or married'). If you choose *schietta*, a bread roll will have ricotta placed in it before being dipped into boiling lard, while the 'married' roll is stuffed with sautéed beef spleen!

By the 18th century, the preservation of snow was big business. Teams of men were employed to transport snow to grottoes, which were bought or leased, where the snow could be preserved.

For master-chef recipes, try the brilliantly funny *Bruculinu, America: Remembrances of Sicilian-American Brooklyn Told in Stories and Recipes* by Vincent Schiavelli.

Get your kitchen ready for some serious Italian cooking with www.cybercucina.com, where you can order anything from a jasmine-honey spoon to the latest gourmet offerings.

For something a little more flavoursome you might try one of the whites from Etna, where the cataratto grapes flourish. Their mild fragrance sits well with the spicier snapper dishes. Another good choice from the area is the Rosé Ciclopì, which is known as the best wine to drink with rabbit dishes.

Other excellent reds include those produced by Cerasuolo and Donnafugata. Messina produces the strong Faro red, which goes well with most meat dishes, as well as a good white called Capo Bianco.

From the southwest, the best-known wines are the red Terreforti produced near Catania, and the Anapo white and Eoro and Pachino reds, all produced near Syracuse. From the west, Belice (red and white) and Capo Boeo (white) are good choices. Segesta reds and whites are also popular for their well-balanced body and generous taste.

Most wines are fairly cheap, though (as for any wine) prices vary according to the vintage. In a restaurant a decent wine should cost you around €12 to €20, with a table wine (*vino da tavola*) at around €8.

Sicilian dessert wines are excellent, and are worth buying to take home. Top of the list is Marsala's sweet wine; the best (and most widely known) labels are Florio and Pellegrino. Sweet malvasia (from the Aeolian island of Salina) is a fruity wine whose best producer is Carlo Hauser – just look for his name on the bottle and you know you have a good drop. Italy's most famous moscato is the passito di Pantelleria; it has a deep amber colour, and an extraordinary taste of apricots and vanilla.

For something stronger try a shot of Averna from Caltanissetta or the fiery Fuoco dell'Etna.

There are four main classifications of wine – DOC, DOCG (*denominazione d'origine controllata e garantita*), IGT (*indicazione geografica tipica*) and *vino da tavola* (table wine) – which will be marked on the label. A DOC wine is produced subject to certain specifications, although the label does not certify quality. DOCG is subject to the same requirements as normal DOC, but is also tested by government inspectors for quality. IGT is a recent term introduced to cover wines from quality regions that are of a style or use grapes that fall outside the DOC and DOCG classifications.

The Slow Food Movement's annually updated *Guide to Italian Wines* is an excellent resource with region-by-region profiles of producers and their wines.

COOKING COURSES

If your interest in Sicilian food extends beyond consuming it, why not try a cooking course? The following are some of our favourites:

Anna Tasca Lanza (<http://cuisineinternational.com>) The grand dame of Sicilian cookery courses is located on the Regaleali estate, presided over by Anna Tasca. Anna is assisted by her sister and

Sicilian Home Cooking: Family Recipes from Gangivecchio is a wonderful cookery book by Wanda Tornabene, Giovanna Tornabene and Michele Evans, who run one of Sicily's most highly regarded restaurants.

The website www.wineofsicily.com should give you a good idea of the range of Sicilian wines and where to get hold of them.

NEW TALENT

Many find the wines from Etna to be the most exciting new offering from Sicily, with the combination of fiery soil and high altitude producing perfumed and vibrant wines.

Here are some worth tasting:

- 2006 Scilio Etna Bianco – complex and minerally
- 2006 Casa Mia Sangiovese – full of flavour and oaky
- 2006 Nerello Mascalese – soft and perfumed
- 2006 Cerasuolo di Vittoria – a fruity wine made with nero d'Avola grapes
- 2004 Montenero, Abbazia Santa Anastasia – nero d'Avola mixed with 40% merlot and cabernet; it's complex yet cool

CAFFÈ ALLA SICILIANA (COFFEE, SICILIAN STYLE)

Sicilians take their coffee seriously; some say even more seriously than in the rest of Italy, which is quite a feat.

First is the pure and simple espresso – a tiny cup of very strong black coffee. *Doppio espresso* is a double shot of the same. If you want the watery version of coffee, similar to filter coffee, ask for a *caffè Americano*.

Enter the milk. A *caffè latte* is coffee with a reasonable amount of milk. A stronger version is the *caffè macchiato*, basically an espresso with a dash of milk. Alternatively, you can have *latte macchiato*, a glass of hot milk with a dash of coffee. The cappuccino is a stronger, smaller version of the *caffè latte*, with froth on top.

If you don't want to stick out like a sore thumb, don't order a *caffè latte* or cappuccino after lunch and dinner – it wouldn't occur to Italians and the waiters are guaranteed to eye you with spite or simply say 'there is no milk'. An espresso or *macchiato* is perfectly acceptable. Of course, if you still want a cappuccino you will get one but you might have to repeat your request a couple of times to convince disbelieving waiters that they have heard correctly.

In summer, the local version of an iced coffee is a *caffè freddo*, served in a long glass and sometimes helped along with ice cubes.

To warm up on those winter nights, a *corretto* might be for you – an espresso 'corrected' with a dash of grappa (grape-based liqueur) or some other spirit.

her husband, Venceslao (a specialist in Sicilian history), and highlights include watching shepherds making ricotta and a tour of the acclaimed winery.

Arblaster & Clarke (☎ in Britain 01730-89 33 44; www.arblasterandclarke.com) A Rolls-Royce of a wine tour – you dine in baronial splendour as you tour the island's finest sights and visit its most lauded estates, including Rapitalà, Donnafugata, Regaleali and Barone de Villagrande, with a fully qualified wine expert.

Tasting Places (☎ in Britain 020-746 00 077; www.tastingplaces.com) An excellent tour focusing on the western side of Sicily, it includes accommodation in the 18th-century Villa Ravidà at Menfi. Day trips to Mozia, Marsala and Palermo enable you to enjoy the hurly-burly of the marketplace as well as the refined air of the winery.

Anna Tasca Lanza's *The Heart of Sicily* documents a whole year in the life of Regaleali, one of the few feudal estates still in operation, combining beautiful photography and history with authentic recipes.

EAT YOUR WORDS

Get behind the cuisine scene by getting to know the language.

Useful Phrases

I'd like to reserve a table.

vo-ray ree-ser-va-re oon ta-vo-lo

Vorrei riservare un tavolo.

I'd like the menu, please.

vo-ray eel me-noo per fa-vo-re

Vorrei il menu, per favore.

What would you recommend?

ko-za mee kon-see-lyà

Cosa mi consiglia?

Please bring the bill.

mee por-ta eel kon-to per fa-vo-re

Mi porta il conto, per favore?

Is service included in the bill?

eel ser-vee-tsyo e kom-pre-zo nel kon-to

Il servizio è compreso nel conto?

I'm a vegetarian.

so-no ve-je-ta-rya-no/na

Sono vegetariano/a. (m/f)

I'm a vegan.

so-no ve-je-ta-lyà-no/na

Sono vegetariano/a. (m/f)

Food Glossary

BASICS

cameriere/a
cena

ka-mer-ye-re/ra
che-na

waiter (m/f)
dinner

<i>coltello</i>	<i>kol-te-lo</i>	knife
<i>conto</i>	<i>kon-to</i>	bill/cheque
<i>cucchiaio</i>	<i>koo-ky-a-yo</i>	spoon
<i>enoteca</i>	<i>e-no te-ka</i>	wine bar
<i>forchetta</i>	<i>for-ke-ta</i>	fork
<i>(non) fumatori</i>	<i>(non) foo-ma-to-ree</i>	(non)smoking
<i>pranzo</i>	<i>pran-dzo</i>	lunch
<i>prima colazione</i>	<i>pree-ma ko-la-tsyo-ne</i>	breakfast
<i>ristorante</i>	<i>ree-sto-ran-te</i>	restaurant
<i>spuntino</i>	<i>spun-ti-no</i>	snack
<i>trattoria</i>	<i>tra-to-ria</i>	informal restaurant

STAPLES

<i>aceto</i>	<i>a-che-to</i>	vinegar
<i>acqua</i>	<i>ac-wa</i>	water
<i>aglio</i>	<i>a-lyo</i>	garlic
<i>burro</i>	<i>bu-ro</i>	butter
<i>formaggio</i>	<i>for-ma-jo</i>	cheese
<i>latte</i>	<i>la-te</i>	milk
<i>limone</i>	<i>lee-mo-ne</i>	lemon
<i>miele</i>	<i>mye-le</i>	honey
<i>olio</i>	<i>o-lyo</i>	oil
<i>olive</i>	<i>o-lee-ve</i>	olive
<i>pane</i>	<i>pa-ne</i>	bread
<i>panna</i>	<i>pa-na</i>	cream
<i>peperoncino</i>	<i>pe-pe-ron-chee-n</i>	chilli
<i>riso</i>	<i>ree-so</i>	rice
<i>rucola</i>	<i>roo-co-la</i>	rocket
<i>sale</i>	<i>sa-le</i>	salt
<i>uovo/uova</i>	<i>wo-vo/wo-va</i>	egg/eggs
<i>zucchero</i>	<i>dzoo-ke-ro</i>	sugar

MEAL PREPARATION

<i>arrosto/a</i>	<i>a-ros-to/ta</i>	roasted
<i>bollito/a</i>	<i>bo-lee-to/ta</i>	boiled
<i>cotto/a</i>	<i>co-to/ta</i>	cooked
<i>cruda/a</i>	<i>croo-do/da</i>	raw
<i>fritto/a</i>	<i>free-to/ta</i>	fried
<i>griglia</i>	<i>gree-ly-a</i>	grilled

MEAT, FISH & SEAFOOD

<i>acciughe</i>	<i>a-choo-ge</i>	anchovies
<i>agnello</i>	<i>a-nye-lo</i>	lamb
<i>aragosta</i>	<i>a-ra-go-sta</i>	lobster
<i>bistecca</i>	<i>bi-ste-ca</i>	steak
<i>calamari</i>	<i>ca-la-ma-ree</i>	squid
<i>capretto</i>	<i>cap-re-to</i>	kid (goat)
<i>coniglio</i>	<i>co-nee-lyo</i>	rabbit
<i>cozze</i>	<i>co-tse</i>	mussels
<i>fegato</i>	<i>fe-ga-to</i>	liver
<i>frutti di mare</i>	<i>froo-tee dee ma-re</i>	seafood
<i>gamberoni</i>	<i>gam-be-ro-nee</i>	prawns
<i>granchio</i>	<i>gran-kyo</i>	crab
<i>manzo</i>	<i>man-dzo</i>	beef
<i>merluzzo</i>	<i>mer-loo-tso</i>	cod

<i>ostriche</i>	<i>os-tree-ke</i>	oysters
<i>pesce spada</i>	<i>pe-she spa-da</i>	swordfish
<i>pollo</i>	<i>po-lo</i>	chicken
<i>polpi</i>	<i>pol-pee</i>	octopus
<i>salsiccia</i>	<i>sal-see-cha</i>	sausage
<i>sarde</i>	<i>sar-de</i>	sardines
<i>seppia</i>	<i>se-pya</i>	cuttlefish
<i>sgombro</i>	<i>sgom-bro</i>	mackerel
<i>tonno</i>	<i>to-no</i>	tuna
<i>trippa</i>	<i>tree-pa</i>	tripe
<i>vitello</i>	<i>vee-te-lo</i>	veal
<i>vongole</i>	<i>von-go-le</i>	clams

FRUIT & VEGETABLES

<i>arancia</i>	<i>a-ran-cha</i>	orange
<i>asparagi</i>	<i>as-pa-ra-jee</i>	asparagus
<i>carciofi</i>	<i>car-cho-fee</i>	artichokes
<i>carota</i>	<i>ca-ro-ta</i>	carrot
<i>cavolo</i>	<i>ca-vo-lo</i>	cabbage
<i>ciliegia</i>	<i>chee-lye-ja</i>	cherry
<i>fagiolini</i>	<i>fa-jo-lee-nee</i>	green beans
<i>finocchio</i>	<i>fee-no-kyo</i>	fennel
<i>fragole</i>	<i>fra-go-le</i>	strawberries
<i>funghi</i>	<i>foan-gee</i>	mushrooms
<i>mela</i>	<i>me-la</i>	apple
<i>melanzane</i>	<i>me-lan-dza-ne</i>	aubergine
<i>patate</i>	<i>pa-ta-te</i>	potatoes
<i>pepe</i>	<i>pe-pe</i>	pepper
<i>peperoni</i>	<i>pe-pe-ro-nee</i>	capsicum
<i>pere</i>	<i>pe-re</i>	pears
<i>pesca</i>	<i>pes-ka</i>	peach
<i>piselli</i>	<i>pee-se-lee</i>	peas
<i>pomodori</i>	<i>po-mo-do-ree</i>	tomatoes
<i>spinaci</i>	<i>spee-na-chee</i>	spinach
<i>uva</i>	<i>oo-va</i>	grapes

DRINKS

<i>birra</i>	<i>bee-ra</i>	beer
<i>caffè</i>	<i>ca-fe</i>	coffee
<i>tè</i>	<i>te</i>	tea
<i>vino rosso/bianco</i>	<i>vee-no ro-so/byan-ko</i>	red/white wine

Architecture & the Arts

For nearly 10,000 years Sicily has been accumulating a rich array of architectural and artistic treasures, a distillation of styles, techniques and influences from around the Mediterranean basin. Building for posterity, the Greeks left more Doric temples in Sicily than in Greece itself; the Byzantines introduced a love of ornamentation and symbolism, and the fabulous technique of gold-leaf mosaic; while Arab artisans perfected the skill, adding a love of geometric patterns and fanciful decorative devices. The most original and startling artistic style was developed under the Normans, who married Arab artistry with the austere lines of their French Romanesque background, but it is in the Spanish baroque of the 17th and 18th centuries that the extravagance of Sicilian taste really found its soul mate.

ARCHITECTURE & THE VISUAL ARTS

Hellenistic Sicily

The sheer scale and number of Greek buildings and temples in Sicily are unique in their concentration, and the archaeological museums at Palermo, Agrigento, Gela and Syracuse exhibit a stunning range of artefacts. The founding of Syracuse in 735 BC marked the beginning of the extraordinary collaboration between the Hellenistic world and Sicily's cultural and artistic forces. Undoubtedly, the apogee of their creative talents is the Doric temple, splendid examples of which can be seen at Selinunte, Segesta, Syracuse and at Agrigento's Valley of the Temples.

The best preserved example in the world of a Doric temple is the Temple of Concord in Agrigento, which illustrates perfectly the classic rectangular plan with a divided interior, often with an end space that was occupied by the main altar. Although difficult to imagine now, the temples would have been plastered and brightly painted. Despite a rich architectural legacy, the Greek temples in Sicily had little sculptural relief work. The only notable exception was the unusual metopes (spaces along the frieze) of Selinunte, which can now be viewed in the Museo Archeologico Regionale (p85) in Palermo.

Greek theatres are another highlight, even though most of them were either modified or completely rebuilt during the Roman occupation to allow for gladiatorial games. Taormina's theatre, with its lofty position, is the most spectacular, although the theatre at Segesta is closer to the original Greek design. It is framed by a wonderful, natural setting and shows the peculiar talent of the Greeks for harmonising design and environment.

The range of sculpture in the museums of Palermo and Syracuse and the timescale it covers exhibit perfectly the transformation of Greek sculpture from the static, full-frontal, one-piece archaic sculptures that look very Egyptian in style, to the more fluid and naturalistic depiction of form and movement, which resulted in the exceptional *Landolina venus* (p220) and the exquisite *Il giovinetto di mozia* (The Boy of Mozia).

The artistic achievement of the Sicilian Greeks was not limited to sculpture alone, for they produced a phenomenal amount of pottery, including the beautiful red-and-black *kraters* of Gela, the world's most important and extensive collection.

Rapacious Rome

Sicily benefited little from Rome's imperial building zeal. Seen as the potential breadbasket for the growing Roman army, Sicily's forested land was cleared to make way for fields of wheat and provincial governors grew rich on the

profits and plunder of the island. One governor, Verres (73–71 BC), proved so greedy in stripping the temples of their treasures that Cicero pursued him to Rome and prosecuted him before the Senate.

Focused on gaming, hunting, racing and gladiatorial combat, Roman culture was popular culture. Both the theatres at Taormina and Syracuse were modified to accommodate these pastimes, and certainly at Taormina it is easy to see a new addition: a rectangular stage with a *scaenae frons* (colonnaded backdrop), a complete diversion from the natural settings preferred by the Greeks.

The most wonderful example of the colonial lifestyle enjoyed by the Romans is the Villa Romana del Casale (p252). This fantastic complex, made up of 50 rooms, galleries and corridors, once belonged to the co-emperor Maximian, who ruled jointly with Diocletian between AD 286 and 305. The villa's ruins are mightily impressive but the real draw is the delightful polychromatic mosaics, which offer an exhaustive portrayal of the pleasures of provincial life.

A Light in the Dark: Eastern Influences

Under the skilful hand of the Byzantine artist, classical naturalism gave way to eastern stylisation. The striving for realism in the mosaics at the Villa Romana di Casale was supplanted by deliberate stylisation and symbolism. Above all the Byzantine world loved gold, giving the Sicilians their first taste of ornamentation, the love of which has remained with them to this day. The same goes for an attachment to religious icons. More importantly, the Byzantine world gave the Sicilian church the basilican plan. This form – with its squat nave and semicircular apse, focusing the worshipper's gaze on the eastern altar – was to reach maturity in the fantastic Norman churches, 300 years later.

The Arabs absorbed the central enigma of Byzantine church architecture, a world of mystery and spirituality, heightened by symbolic colours and contrasts of dark and light. Byzantine symbolism was taken one step further into fanciful geometric designs that offered a coded approach to the mystery of God. Forbidden to reproduce images, the Arabs excelled at abstract decoration: arabesques, pointed arches, marble and mosaic inlay, honeycomb niches and vaults and an excess of latticework are all evident in the Arab palace of La Zisa (p88), which now houses a museum of Arab crafts. In the same way that their decoration creates a maze of interest, the Arabs redrew Sicily's street plans using a 'branching tree' street grid, a deliberately confusing design of blind alleys and offshoots.

Love thy Normans: Sicilian Romanesque

The Normans were prodigious builders, but their reference points were the vertical lines of French Romanesque, visible in the sobriety of Palermo's La Magione or the church of San Nicola in Agrigento. Roger I recognised the superior artistry of the Arabs and to his lasting credit employed their substantial skills and aesthetic sense in the monuments of his dazzling kingdom.

The Norman period is characterised by an intoxicating mix of Byzantine, Arab and Norman styles, an organic fusion of the best that each culture had to offer. Known as the Sicilian Romanesque style, it was eagerly patronised by royalty, the clergy and the aristocracy. The early years of Norman rule saw the construction of some of the finest buildings of the era, most notably the cathedrals at Monreale and Cefalù along with the expansion of the Palazzo dei Normanni in Palermo.

The first of the great constructions, the Duomo di Cefalù (cathedral), was commissioned in 1131 by Roger II (1095–1154) in classic Romanesque

The Mosaics of Norman Sicily by Otto Demus offers wonderful coverage and authoritative text on Sicily's unique mosaic heritage.

For interesting and up-to-date coverage of Sicilian art history and architecture log on to www.bestofsicily.com/magazine.htm, an excellent online magazine featuring articles on art and architecture by Italian specialists.

style (a Latin-cross plan made up of a long, tall nave, a deep choir stall and two flanking chapels). The decoration of the interior, with its extensive mosaics, stands out as being among the finest anywhere in Europe. In the cupola the wide-eyed figure of Christ Pantocrator (All-Powerful) shimmers in a universe of gold.

No less impressive but more Eastern in flavour is the Cappella Palatina (Palatine Chapel) in the enormous Palazzo dei Normanni in Palermo, the stronghold of Norman power in Sicily. The decoration of the chapel owes much to Arab influences with its Eastern-style cupola and wooden *muqarnas* (a decorative device resembling stalactites) ceiling – unique in a Christian church. The exotic concoction of cultural influences is evident in the unusual scenes sourced from Greek, Persian and Indian myths and the lavish zigzagging patterns – of marble with mosaic inlay – that cover every surface.

Less Eastern, but far bigger and grander, is the cathedral at Monreale, created by William II (r 1166–89). With some 6340 sq metres of golden mosaic, the overwhelming scale of the decoration is breathtaking. The work drew artisans from Persia, Asia, Greece and Venice, who executed the entire Bible story from the Fall (at the entrance) to the Last Judgment (at the westernmost end) in golden mosaic. The whole effect is, as Bishop Gregorovius enviously noted, 'so luminous and bright as to appear unbecoming of a Northern god'. Outside, the cathedral is one of the most sumptuous Romanesque cloisters in the world, with elegant arches supported by a dazzling array of more than 200 slender columns decorated in shimmering mosaic. Each column supports an enchanting sculpted capital – each one different – and taken together they represent a unique record of medieval Sicily.

With the demise of the Normans it would be another 400 years before Sicily witnessed as rich a period of architectural creativity.

Gothic & Renaissance Sicily: A Missed Opportunity?

In sculpture and architecture, the dominant school of the 15th and 16th centuries was founded by Domenico Gagini (c 1430–92). A student of the Quattrocento (15th-century) Florentine style, he almost single-handedly dragged Sicilian architecture out of the Middle Ages and created a style that fused local designs with those of the budding Renaissance on the Italian mainland. Traditional styles persisted, particularly in the construction of fortified homes, which copied the Arab-Norman model – medieval appearance, with plenty of rustication and squinches (small arches) – rather than contemporary forms. The 15th century also saw the arrival of the Catalan-Gothic style, a blend of influences that featured horizontal lines and large, flat, bare surfaces and is most obvious in Palermo's cathedral and in the Chiesa di San Giorgio Vecchio in Ragusa.

Although Sicily did not figure too much in the learning and aesthetic principles that swept through Italy and the rest of Europe during the Renaissance – thanks to the fact that it was sealed off from the mainland on account of its Spanish rulers – Sicilian painting and sculpture were very much in the ascendancy; however, their influences were mostly Spanish and Flemish. The first of the great Sicilian artists was Antonello da Messina (1430–79), who trained in the Flemish style but was later influenced by Piero della Francesca (1420–92), one of the earliest luminaries of Renaissance art. Only four of Messina's works of art remain in Sicily, the most notable being *Annunciazione*, in the Museo Regionale d'Arte Medioevale e Moderna in Syracuse.

In the field of sculpture, the work of Francesco Laurana (1430–1502) and Domenico Gagini dominated the 15th and 16th centuries. Both were heavily influenced by the early Renaissance, particularly the 14th-century Florentine school, but their work continued to blend new ideas with late

Palazzi of Sicily (1998) by Angheli Zalapi, with photographs by Melo Minnella, gives a peek into Sicily's magnificent palaces and is particularly interesting for visitors to Palermo.

Gothic precedents. Both produced a prolific amount of work in Sicily's churches. However, it was Antonello Gagini (1478–1536), Domenico's son, who was to become the most popular and prestigious Sicilian sculptor of his day. Working in marble, terracotta and stucco, he covered the whole gamut of ecclesiastical décor from pulpits and altars to large-scale façades and statuary. His work can be seen in churches across the island and in the cathedrals of Palermo, Syracuse, Nicosia and Trapani.

Baroque Brilliance: An Architectural Love Affair

Devastated by the earthquake of 1693, Sicily had a perfect opportunity to experiment with the very latest architectural fashion, the hugely extravagant baroque style. Baroque grabbed the Sicilian imagination and flurries of new urban plans were drawn up to modernise cities. These plans favoured wider streets punctuated by grandiose squares with theatrical vistas of prestigious buildings. The grafting of the Quattro Canti onto the old Arab street plan of Palermo is a perfect example.

The heavy ornamental style allowed for wild experimentation, fanciful balconies, sculpted stonework and spatial symmetry. The aristocracy was mad for it and competed shamelessly, creating ever more opulent palazzi such as the Palazzo Villadorata in Noto. Towns that were almost entirely destroyed were rebuilt in this elegant new style, including Noto, Modica, Ragusa, Catania and large parts of Syracuse.

Spearheading this new style was Rosario Gagliardi (1700–70), the engineer and architect considered to be the father of Sicilian baroque. He was the designer of the splendid Cattedrale di San Giorgio at Ragusa Ibla as well as the Chiesa di San Giorgio in Modica. Giovanni Battista Vaccarini (1702–68) introduced the Roman baroque to Catania and his work shows the distinctive influence of Francesco Borromini; another influential Catania-based (though not Sicily-born) architect was Stefano Ittar (1730–1789), who 'took over' from Vaccarini after his death in 1768. Among many other buildings, Ittar designed the façade of the Collegiata, a church originally designed by Antonio Amato. In Syracuse, Andrea Palma (1664–1730) designed the wonderful façade of the city's cathedral, adding yet another cultural layer to the church and its history.

Interiors of coloured marbles and wildly elaborate stucco decoration were no less fanciful, particularly the extravagant works of Giacomo Serpotta (1656–1732), who worked mainly in western Sicily. The oratories of Santa Zita and San Domenico in Palermo are masterpieces of stuccowork, a writhing mass of allegorical statues, tumbling cherubs and saints.

Other notable architects of this time were Filippo Juvarra (1678–1736), born in Messina, where he designed the festive settings for the coronation of Philip V; Giovanni Biagio Amico (1684–1754), who renovated the 13th-century Church of Carmine in Licata, Agrigento province, in 1748; and Tommaso Maria Napoli, an early-18th-century Dominican monk who imported the fashionable Viennese Baroque to Sicily and designed the beautiful Villa Valguarnera (built between 1713 and 1737) and Villa Palagonia (started in 1709) in Bagheria.

In the 17th century, Sicily benefited artistically from the presence of two non-Sicilian artists. Caravaggio (1571–1610), whose turbulent life led him from mainland Italy to Sicily in the late 1600s, created some important works here. Messina's Museo Regionale has two very fine Caravaggio paintings. The Flemish painter Anthony Van Dyck (1599–1641) was in Sicily in 1624 and you can see his altarpiece of the Virgin with San Domenico in the Oratorio del Rosario di Santa Zita in Palermo.

Curl up and watch Visconti's lush cinematic interpretation of *Il gattopardo* (The Leopard), an insight into Sicily's decadent aristocracy filmed in some of the most opulent baroque villas on the island.

Anthony Blunt's classic *The Sicilian Baroque* (1968) is the key read on the subject, containing a detailed and precise history of the style.

ARTE POVERA & RENATO GUTTUSO

There is an alarming dearth of good 19th- and 20th-century art in Sicily. The one exception to this is the work of the painter Renato Guttuso (1912–87), who became the most sought-after painter in Italy during the heyday of the 1960s. He was renowned for his visceral style, which reminded modern Italy of the poor and passionate life that had been lost. His paintings burst with colour and vigour but are typically tinged with a more ominous atmosphere of anguish and despair. His most famous work is *La vucciria* (1974), a depiction of Palermo's notorious street market of the same name.

Back to the Classics

With the new vogue for all things classical in 18th and 19th century Europe, architects turned away from the flamboyant excesses of baroque to revisit the simpler and more formal styles of classical architecture, and the neoclassical style was born. Palermo's closer links with the mainland put the city at the vanguard of the neoclassical movement championed by architect Venanzio Marvuglia (1729–1814). However, it was Giovanni Battista Basile (1825–91) and his son, Ernesto (1857–1932), who gave Sicily its most famous neoclassical monuments: the Teatro Massimo (built during 1875 to 1897) and the Grand Hotel Villa Igiea (1899), both in Palermo. Patronised by the wealthy and influential Florio family, Basile is perhaps even more famous for his Art Nouveau (or Liberty style) interiors, the dining room of the Villa Igiea being the finest remaining example.

Shocks to the System: Fascism, Futurism & War

Following the 1908 earthquake Messina had to be rebuilt, and the results are surprisingly good. Wide boulevards, elegant civic buildings and a pleasantly designed waterfront give Messina a 'modern' feeling compared with other Sicilian cities. Since then little of note has been built with the exception of Fascist additions in the Art Deco style (check out the enormous edifice of the Palermo post office, p77). Much damage was sustained by Sicily during the Allies' bombing in WWII and you can still see bombed-out buildings, unreconstructed, in Palermo's old quarter.

Architecture is Dead?

The 21st century hasn't been massively fruitful for Sicilian art and architecture, though many Sicilian towns – Syracuse and Catania in particular – have been beautifully restored. Palermo's old quarter is getting there, though thanks to civic corruption and misappropriated funding, it's lagging behind.

Illegal construction (known as *case abusive*) has long been a Mafia favourite for laundering money and funds. As a result, huge swathes of the island are now covered by incomplete highways and uninspiring housing schemes. The most shocking of these was the illegal granting of construction permits for houses in Agrigento's Valley of the Temples – supposedly a protected park. Even worse, a proposal approved by the Sicilian parliament in October 2004 sanctioned the building of seven new hotels on the Aeolian Islands, a UN World Heritage site, though these plans have been abandoned for the moment thanks to the Unesco's warnings that such works would strike the islands off the prestigious Heritage list.

Another controversial construction project that nearly made it was the bridge over the Straits of Messina. Estimated to cost around €4.6 million but speculated to be a honey pot for the Mafia, the bridge was championed by Berlusconi's administration and dumped by Romano Prodi in 2006. An online voting forum showed that the Sicilian public didn't back the bridge

To learn about all the major artistic movements and their chief exponents check out www.artcyclopedia.com.

either, and the money was redirected into Sicily's infrastructure, which needs all the help it can get.

LITERATURE

Dogged by centuries of oppression, isolation, lack of education and poverty and divided into an illiterate peasantry and a decadent aristocracy, it is hardly surprising that prior to the 19th century Sicily yielded a complete absence of great literature. The written word remained something of a mystery.

In such a context it is interesting to learn that the first official literature in Italian was written in Palermo in the 13th century at the School of Poetry patronised by Frederick II. But such high-minded works were irrelevant to the illiterate peasantry whose main pleasure was the regular celebration of saint's days and religious occasions and, later, the popular theatre of the *opera dei pupi* (puppet theatre; see p64 for details).

The political upheaval of the 19th and 20th centuries finally broke the silence of the Sicilian pen when the literary colossus Giovanni Verga (1840–1922) emerged onto the scene. Living through some of the most intense historical vicissitudes of modern Italy – the unification of Italy, WWI and the rise of Fascism – his work was to have a major impact on Italian literature. His greatest novel, *I malavoglia* (The Malavoglia Family; 1881), essentially a story about a family's struggle for survival through desperate times in Sicily, is still a permanent fixture on every Sicilian schoolchild's reading list.

Since then Sicilian writers have produced fiction to rival the best contemporary European works. Playwright and novelist Luigi Pirandello (1867–1936) was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1934 for a substantial body of work that included *Sei personaggi in ricerca di un autore* (Six Characters in Search of an Author) and *Enrico IV* (Henry IV). Poet Salvatore Quasimodo (1901–68) won the award in 1959 for his exquisite lyric verse, which included delightful translations of works by Shakespeare and Pablo Neruda. Elio Vittorini (1908–66) captured the essence of the Sicilian migration north in his masterpiece *Conversazione in sicilia* (1941), the story of a man's return to the roots of his personal, historical and cultural identity.

Sicily's most famous novel was a one-off by an aristocrat whose intent was to chronicle the social upheaval caused by the end of the old regime and the unification of Italy. Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1896–1957) published *Il gattopardo* (The Leopard) in 1957 to immediate critical acclaim. Though strictly a period novel, its enduring relevance lies in the minutely accurate observations of what it means to be Sicilian.

Much of Sicily's 20th-century literature is more political than literary. None is more so than the work of Danilo Dolci (1924–97), a social activist commonly known as the 'Sicilian Gandhi'. His *Report from Palermo* (1959) and subsequent *Sicilian Lives* (1981), both detailing the squalid living conditions of many of Sicily's poorest inhabitants, earned him the enduring animosity of the authorities and the Church. (Cardinal Ernesto Ruffini publicly denounced him for 'defaming' all Sicilians.) He, too, was nominated for the Nobel Prize and was awarded the Lenin Peace Prize in 1958.

The other great subject for modern Sicilian writers is, of course, the Mafia. *Men of Honour* (1993) by Giovanni Falcone is a good place to start (Falcone was one of the leading magistrates in the 1990 Mafia supertrials and was murdered in May 1992). But for a real insight into the organisation search out the work of Leonardo Sciascia (1921–89), whose novel *Il giorno della civetta* (The Day of the Owl; 1961) was the first Italian novel to take the Mafia as its subject. Throughout his career, Sciascia probed the topic, practically inventing a genre of his own. His protégé Gesualdo Bufalino (1920–96) won the prestigious Strega Prize in 1988 for his novel *Le menzogne della notte* (Night's Lies), the

When Dante wrote *The Divine Comedy* he chose to use a version of the 'new' Italian developed in 13th-century Palermo rather than the accepted language of high literature, Latin.

A SICILIAN ICONOCLAST

Acclaimed and criticised throughout his life, Leonardo Sciascia is one of the most important Italian writers of the 20th century. He proudly claimed to have been the first Sicilian writer to directly tackle the contentious subject of the Mafia, in *The Day of the Owl*. It was a topic that fascinated and tormented him until the day he died. Although radically opposed to the activities of organised crime, he was sensitive to the paradoxical nature of Cosa Nostra, which he considered to be against Sicily yet an intangible part of its social and cultural fabric.

In his later years, he developed an almost irrational dislike of the activities of Giovanni Falcone's anti-Mafia commission, accusing the magistrate of being vainglorious and nothing more than a headline chaser. A committed left-winger, he dallied with extremist elements during the 1970s and in 1979 published a famous pamphlet called *Il caso aldo moro* (The Aldo Moro Affair) in which he subtly accused the ruling Democrazia Cristiana (DC; Christian Democrats) of collusion in the kidnapping of the Italian prime minister Aldo Moro by the Red Brigades. Although the popular press derided him at the time, much of what he believed was proven to be at least partially true, and Sciascia consolidated his position as a hero of the antiestablishment opposition.

Despite his political activities, Sciascia is still remembered as one of the best writers to have emerged from Sicily. His other great novels include *A ciascuno il suo* (To Each His Own; 1966), and *Il consiglio d'egitto* (The Council of Egypt) and *Todo modo* (One Way or Another), both published in 1974. His simple and direct approach to narrative marked him as one of the great stylists of the 20th century, while his often-black humour made him one of the most widely read authors of his generation.

tale of four condemned men who spend the eve of their execution recounting the most memorable moments of their lives. Bufalino went on to become one of Italy's finest writers, mastering a style akin to literary baroque – intense, tortured and surreal. His haunting novel *La Diceria dell'Untore* (The Plague Sower; 1981), which won Italy's Campiello Prize, is the story of a tuberculosis patient at a Palermo sanatorium in the late 1940s. Guiding the reader through a landscape of doom, Bufalino invokes the horrors of wartime and the hopelessness of the patients who come to know each other 'before our lead-sealed freight car arrives at the depot of its destination'.

Novels such as *Volevo i pantaloni* (I Wanted to Wear Trousers; 1988) by Lara Cardella and *Cento colpi di spazzola prima di andare a dormire* (100 Strokes of the Brush before Bed; 2003) by Melissa Panarello created shock waves when they were published. Cardella's novel, set in the 1960s, deals with the prejudice against women in small-town Sicily (she decides to wear trousers and is labelled a prostitute), while Panarello's explicit account of a teenage girl's sexual experimentation became Sicily's best-selling novel after *Il gattopardo*.

Today, one of Italy's most popular novelists is the Sicilian crime writer Andrea Camilleri (born 1925). His immensely popular series, *Il cane di terracotta* (The Terracotta Dog), about police superintendent Salvo Montalbano, including the two latest, *The Patience of the Spider* and *The Paper Moon*, is available in translation. All bookshops stock his work.

CINEMA

The rich emotional, psychological and physical landscape of Sicily has long inspired an impressive list of film-makers, from the talented Luchino Visconti to the illustrious Francis Ford Coppola. Visconti's two classics, *La terra trema* (The Earth Shook; 1947) and *Il gattopardo* (1963), illustrate the breadth of Sicilian tales – the former a story of grinding poverty and misfortune in a benighted fishing family while the latter oozes the kind of grand decadence that one imagines preceded the French Revolution.

Lady Chatterley's Lover was written by DH Lawrence in Taormina and was based on events that took place in Sicily.

In Roberto Rossellini's *Stromboli* (1950), the explosive love affair between a Lithuanian refugee and a local fisherman is aptly viewed against the backdrop of the erupting volcano, while the hypnotic beauty of Michael Radford's *Il postino* (The Postman; 1995), filmed on Salina, seduces one into a false sense of security shattered by the film's tragic denouement.

However, it is Francis Ford Coppola's modern masterpiece, *The Godfather* trilogy (Part I, 1972; Part II, 1974; Part III, 1990), that really succeeds in marrying the psychological landscape of the characters with their physical environment. The varying intensities of light and dark superbly mirror the constant undercurrent of quivering emotion and black betrayal. The *coup de grâce* is the final scene of Part III (played out in Palermo's Teatro Massimo) where Mascagni's opera, *Cavalleria rusticana*, a foreboding story of love and betrayal, is interspersed with scenes of Michael Corleone's final acts of murder that ultimately lead to the death of the person he loves most, his daughter. Other Mafia films are *Cento giorni a palermo* (One Hundred Days in Palermo; 1984), Giuseppe Ferrara's film documenting the murder of police general Carlo della Chiesa, who was killed on the job after only 100 days in Palermo; and Mark Tullio Giordana's *I cento passi* (One Hundred Steps; 2000), the tale of Peppino Impastato, a left-wing activist who repeatedly denounces the activities of local Mafia boss Tano Badalamenti (who lives 100 steps away from Impastato's house) over the airwaves of a small local radio station.

Other Italian-Americans such as the Taviani brothers, who filmed *Kaos* in 1984, sought to reproduce the mad logic of Luigi Pirandello's (p61) universe. The aptly named *Kaos* is a series of tales about loss, lust, love, emigration and death played out through some fantastical story lines – such as the lustful peasant who turns into a wolf at night.

Sicily itself has not produced any directors of note with the exception of Giuseppe Tornatore (born 1956). Tornatore followed up on the incredible success of *Cinema paradiso* (1989) with *La leggenda del pianista sull'oceano* (The Legend of the Pianist over the Ocean; 1998), a quirky tale of a genius piano player born and raised in the bowels of a huge ocean-going liner. His most recent release was *Malèna* (2000), starring Monica Bellucci in a coming-of-age story set in Sicily in the 1940s.

Another fantastic film director who has made Sicily his muse is Emanuele Crialese. He directed two films, *Respiro* (2002) and *Nuovomondo* (The Golden Door; 2006). *Respiro*, filmed on Lampedusa, deals with an eccentric woman who clashes with the villagers, while *Nuovomondo* is a dreamy record of a Sicilian family's emigration to New York at the turn of the 20th century.

Wim Wenders started shooting a new film in Palermo in 2007, so watch this space. It's said not to be about the Mafia, but about a photographer and his woes.

MUSIC

Sicily's popular musical culture has its roots in Arab and Greek laments and ecclesiastical chants, while traditional instruments include the mouth organ, reed pipe, drum and harp. In the past itinerant *cantastorie* (minstrels) travelled from town to town singing their haunting folk songs but this tradition has vanished.

Still, music remains close to the Sicilian soul and both Catania and Palermo have notable opera houses with extensive programmes. The father of bel canto (a style of singing) is, of course, Vincenzo Bellini (1801–35; see boxed text, p200), but before him came the versatile Alessandro Scarlatti (1669–1725). Along with the Venetian Apostolo Zeno and the Roman Pietro Trapassi (or Matastasio), Scarlatti is credited with creating the kind of lyrical opera that

Michelangelo Antonioni's *L'Avventura* (1960) was filmed all over Sicily – you'll recognise the Aeolians, Messina and Noto.

Roberto Rossellini and Ingrid Bergman were the talk of Hollywood with their illicit affair during the filming of *Stromboli* in 1950. Their affair caused such a scandal in the US that Bergman was denounced on the floor of the US senate.

The filming of Giuseppe Tornatore's film *Malèna* was interrupted when equipment disappeared. It emerged that the Mafia was holding it in lieu of payment of the notorious *pizzo* (protection money).

later became known as the 'Neapolitan' style. He wrote more than 100 works, including the oratorios *Il trionfo dell'onore* (The Triumph of Honour; 1718) and *La griselda* (1721).

In contemporary terms, there are virtually no writers of good music in Sicily. Aldo Clementi (born 1925) is a classical composer whose name will be unknown to all but serious students of the avant-garde.

THEATRE

Sicily's Greek heritage is nowhere more palpable than in the Sicilian love of theatre, and ancient sites around the island – Segesta, Agrigento, Syracuse and Tyndaris – maintain a full programme of classical Greek theatre. Syracuse also boasts the only school of classical theatre outside Athens, while Taormina's Teatro Greco is now given over to the island's internationally acclaimed music festival, Taormina Arte. Add to this boisterous street markets and extravagant religious celebrations, and there is no doubt that theatre is at the heart of the island.

In terms of modern theatre, Pirandello (p61) remains Sicily's most famous playwright. His explorations into the world of the absurd and his heavy use of irony set the tone for later playwrights such as Eugène Ionesco (author of the absurdist classic *Rhinoceros*, or *Rhinoceros*) and Jean-Paul Sartre, while his insightful observations into the arcane ways of his fellow Sicilians did much to inspire his two great successors, Giuseppe di Lampedusa (p61; author of *Il gattopardo*) and Leonardo Sciascia (p61).

PUPPET THEATRE

Sicily's most popular form of traditional entertainment is the puppet theatre, which was first introduced to the island by the Spanish in the 18th century. It provided ordinary people with a chance to attend a 'theatre' of sorts as they were barred from nearly everything else. The puppeteers re-enacted the tales of Charlemagne and his heroic knights, Orlando and Rinaldo, against the baddies (forbidding Saracen warriors) with a supporting cast including the fair Angelica and the treacherous Gano di Magonza. A host of magicians and monsters created constant diversions and distractions that kept storylines running for weeks at a time. All the tales had a modern context, and despite their exotic names the characters represented Sicilians in everyday life. Effectively the soap operas of their day, puppet theatres expounded the deepest sentiments of life – unrequited love, treachery, thirst for justice and the anger and frustration of the oppressed. A puppet could speak volumes where a man could not.

The puppets themselves were the creation of a number of extraordinary artisans. In Palermo there was Gaetano Greco, the first of a long line of puppeteers; in Catania there was Giovanni Grasso and his lifelong rival Gaetano Crimi. The last of the great puppeteers was Emanuele Crimi, who died in 1974.

Carved from beech, olive or lemon wood, the puppets stand some 1.5m high, although their height and construction depends on their provenance. In Palermo, puppets have wire joints enabling them to swing swords and behead dragons more effectively.

Nowadays the puppet theatre is really part of Sicilian folklore, maintained largely for the benefit of tourists and children and for the sake of tradition. However, there are still notable puppet theatres in Palermo, Syracuse and Cefalù (see the relevant regional chapters for details). Good puppeteers are judged on the dramatic effect they can create – lots of stamping feet, thundering and a gripping running commentary – and on their speed and skill in directing the battle scenes.

For up-to-date information on all the latest cultural events, including concerts, live-music venues, theatre and festivals, visit www.sicily-news.com.

For everything you need to know about classical drama log on to the bilingual site of the Syracuse-based National Institute of Ancient Drama, www.indafondazione.org. The organisation's website gives details of performances and ticket purchasing.

Environment

THE LAND

The Arabs thought Sicily was paradise on earth and the great medieval poet Ibn Hamdis described the island as 'clothed by the peacock from its many-coloured mantle of feathers'. Certainly, Sicily exhibits a wonderful diversity of scenery, from awesome smoke-belching volcanoes ringed by pretty garden scenery, to darkly forested mountain slopes and ancient river valleys swathed in springtime flowers. In the tropical heat everything vibrates with a peculiar intensity, heightened by the ceaseless singing of cicadas.

Extending over 25,708 sq km, triangular Sicily is the largest island in the Mediterranean, occupying a central and strategic location halfway between Gibraltar and the Suez Canal, creating a bottleneck between Italy and Cap Bon in Tunisia. Not only culturally, but also physically, the island is a combination of European and North African traits as it straddles two continental shelves: the northeastern half of the island is an extension of the Calabrian Apennines, while the southwestern half is topographically similar to the Atlas mountains of North Africa. Popular theory has it that the island was once part of the Italian mainland and that a quick boot from Italy's 'toe' sent it southwards as sea levels rose. But an alternative theory suggests that, despite it being only 4km from the Calabrian tip, the island was formed immediately following the split between the European and African landmasses between 80 and 90 million years ago; evidence points to the fact that Sicily is inching its way *closer* to the mainland, not further away.

Whatever the truth, this precarious geography has given the island a unique topography, not least in its clutch of volcanic outcrops. Most impressive of these is undoubtedly Mt Etna (3323m), Europe's highest volcano – part of a volcanic chain that extends from Vesuvius on the mainland through the rocky arc of the Aeolian Islands to end in tiny Linosa. Inland, the island is characterised by fertile coastal plains, rising to hilly plateaus and finally balding mountains made up of three distinct

Get hold of a copy of *Guida Blu* (in Italian) and discover where Sicily's best beaches are located.

Log on to the website of experienced volcanologist John Seach, www.volcanolive.com, for the most up-to-date information on Sicily's volcanic activity.

EARTHQUAKES & EXPLOSIONS

Sicily's position over two continental plates makes it a major centre for seismic activity. Although most of the Italian peninsula is at risk, earthquakes largely strike the southern half of the country, including Sicily. The last quake occurred in 1968, when the western Belice Valley was flattened by a powerful tremor. Before that, a cataclysmic quake followed by giant tidal waves levelled Messina and half of Calabria in 1908.

As if tidal waves and earthquakes were not enough, Sicily is literally ringed with volcanoes and there have been over 135 recorded eruptions. The end of 2002 saw spectacular eruptions that dazzled spectators and completely destroyed the refuge on Etna's northern flank; the fiery Etna erupted again in September 2007, sending an avalanche of lava down the slopes and thankfully not destroying anything this time round. Although the annals of Sicilian history are littered with tales of the volcano's destructive capabilities, the last really devastating eruption occurred in 1669, when Catania was engulfed in lava.

Sicily's two other active volcanoes are in the Aeolian archipelago. Although both Stromboli (924m) and Vulcano (500m) appear to be smaller than Mt Etna, they are actually roughly the same size: both are rooted at a depth of about 2000m below sea level, with only their cones breaking the surface of the sea. Stromboli's large eruption in 2004 was one of the largest for a while, but despite its permanent activity, there hasn't been a large explosion in recent years. Don't say it twice though.

ranges: the Nebrodi (1847m) and Madonie (1979m) ranges, which skirt along virtually the entire length of the Tyrrhenian Coast up to Palermo; and the Peloritani (1370m), which are confined to the northeast corner of the Ionian Coast.

Off the western coast are the three Egadi Islands of Favignana, Levanzo and Marettimo, while 110km south is the island of Pantelleria – closer to Tunisia than it is to Sicily.

Sicily's population is concentrated mainly on the fertile coastal plains, largely due to the island's historical importance as a centre of maritime trade. The coasts are an alternating panorama of rugged cliffs and low sandy shores that make up some of the island's most beautiful scenery.

WILDLIFE

In ancient times Sicily was bisected by large navigable rivers (the Belice, Simeto and Salso) and cloaked in verdant oak forests. For the Greeks and Romans, hunting large mammals such boars, wolves, deer and wildcats would have been a weekend pastime as seen in the mosaics at the Villa Romana del Casale. But it was the Romans who began the devastating process of deforestation to plant huge wheat fields to feed the Roman army. This ultimately resulted in the silting up of Sicily's rivers, the near-destruction of its limited wildlife and the reduction of its forests to a mere 8% of the total area of the island. Only fish and fowl have managed to escape this devastating scourge and remain in all their abundant variety during the seasonal migrations of the year.

Animals

Sicily's dense population, coupled with deforestation, have had a devastating effect on the island's fauna. Etna's roe deer and the Nebrodi wolves have disappeared, but some smaller forest species cling on for dear life, notably the crested porcupine, fox, pine marten and wildcat, which roam the Nebrodi mountain park. Even the poor dormouse is under threat – not surprising, given that it was once a staple part of the diet. Fortunately, the San Fratello horse, which roams wild in the Nebrodi mountains and is unique to Sicily, is faring somewhat better and is now a protected species.

Sicily has a healthy reptilian population – more hardy than their furry counterparts – of lizards, geckos and snakes. Sicily's only poisonous snake, the viper, can be found slithering around the undergrowth throughout the south of the island – watch out for it at archaeological sites.

Birds

A convenient pit stop on the migration routes south, Sicily makes an excellent spot for bird-watchers. Some 150 species of bird have been recorded on the island, including numerous large birds of prey like the golden eagle, peregrine falcon and red kite, and the rare Bonelli eagle population at Zingaro Reserve. Griffon vultures were also longtime residents in the Nebrodi park but the entire colony was 'accidentally' killed in 1965. They are being re-introduced through Spanish stocks with slow, but successful, results.

In the southeast, the Vendicari park is a well-protected haven for innumerable birds that thrive in the salty marshes, including black-winged stilts, slender-billed gulls and Audoin's gulls. The times to visit are spring (March) and, even better, autumn (September to October), when thousands of waders and ducks, as well as flamingos, storks and egrets, arrive on their yearly migrations.

For many years the Mafia used to dispose of the bodies of its victims down the precipitous gorges of the Rocca Busambra in the Ficuzza forest near Palermo.

Italian beekeepers reported that unusual and unstable weather patterns in 2006 caused a 30% drop in honey production.

Plants

Despite the damage to the island's environment through centuries of widespread deforestation and mismanagement, Sicily retains a rich diversity of flora. In springtime nothing can quite prepare one for the carpets of wild flowers, clichéd as it sounds. After all, this is where the goddess Persephone was collecting flowers when Hades snatched her away to the underworld.

Very little remains of Sicily's ancient forests, but what does is now protected. This includes the Madonie and Nebrodi parks – both rich in oak, elm, ash, cork, manna, holly and yew trees – and the Bosco della Ficuzza near Palermo, the most extensive wooded area of its kind on the island.

Outside the forests you will quickly become familiar with the weirdly sculptural shape of the prickly pear (*Opuntia*), as well as the ubiquitous oleander, umbrella pine, carob and eucalyptus tree – the very basics of Mediterranean flora. The eucalyptus was introduced to the island by the Florio family in the 19th century in order to combat the numerous malarial marshlands that were taking such a heavy toll.

Along the western coast you will see many vineyards. These were introduced by the Greeks, along with the olive tree, which grows throughout the island. You will also see plenty of citrus groves and – in the west – palm dates, both of which were brought here by the Arabs, who also brought cassava and sugar cane (although these are no longer grown commercially). Along the length of the Mediterranean Coast the terrain is characterised by the presence of *maquis* (a North African brush), interspersed with the occasional vineyard or olive grove. The slopes of Mt Etna are extremely fertile on its lower regions, with large tracts of land given over to the cultivation of olives, grapes, citrus and other fruits. The tree spurge (*Euphorbia dendroides*) is a common wild plant on the lower slopes. From 500m up, you can find nut plantations of pistachio, walnut, almond and chestnut, along with pine, beech, silver birch and oak trees. Dusting the charred lava trails with yellow at the very top (2000m to 3000m) are swathes of broom, always the first sign of life on a lava field. The holy thorn of Etna (*Astragalus aetnensis*) and the Etna violet (*Viola aetnensis*) are unique to the mountain.

NATIONAL PARKS & RESERVES

Despite their poor track record on the environment, Sicilian authorities have gone to great lengths to protect large tracts of land from the bulldozer through the designation of specially protected nature reserves.

The two coastal reserves of Zingaro, northwest of Palermo (see p104), and Vendicari, on the southern coast (see p232) are areas of extraordinary beauty that are well run and easily accessible on foot. Made up of three separate marshes and a splendid crescent-shaped beach, Vendicari National Reserve is full of long sandy and pebble beaches on a wonderful stretch of wild coastline protected from the voracious developers. Crisscrossed by medieval water channels constructed when the salt pans were in use, the reserve protects all manner of water birds.

Also in the southeast is the protected Valle dell'Anapo (Anapo Valley), a deep limestone gorge that is the site of the ancient necropolises of Pantalica.

The Parco Naturale Regionale delle Madonie was established in 1989 to protect a vast area of mountainous woodland east of the capital (see p139). It is the only reserve on the island where people actually live, in small towns dotted throughout the hills. Further east is the Parco Regionale dei Nebrodi (see p142), where San Fratello horses can be found roaming free along with all kinds of farmyard animals including sheep, pigs and cattle.

The only other protected forest is the densely wooded and spooky Bosco della Ficuzza, which covers some 4000 hectares of land a mere 35km from

Walkers should equip themselves with the specialist book *Mediterranean Wild Flowers* by Marjorie Blamey and Christopher Grey-Wilson.

The Orto Botanico (Botanical Gardens) in Palermo contain over 12,000 species of plants, including 600,000 herbs. Many of the plants are unique to Europe.

THIS HEATING PLANET

The Central Institute for Research Applied to the Sea (ICRAM) in April 2007 published the results of research stating that the deep waters of the Mediterranean are heating up as a result of global warming. The research took place in the Sicilian Channel (or the Strait of Sicily) – a stretch of waters where marine changes are felt sooner than in the rest of the Mediterranean. The constant trend in rising temperatures is worrying for the sea's biodiversity, especially since the stretch between southwestern Sicily and Tunisia is home to many species of whale, dolphin and shark. Despite the fact that the Mediterranean accounts for just 0.8% of the Earth's marine waters, it is estimated to contain 9% of global biodiversity.

Scientists believe that Italy and southern Europe are especially vulnerable to climate change, and that average temperatures in this area may rise by a staggering 5°C by the end of the century. It is alarming to learn that as a result of global warming 357 Sicilian species are in danger of extinction.

Palermo. It is full of oak and chestnut trees and was once a royal hunting estate. Above the woodland rises the impressive Rocca Busambra (1613m), a favourite nesting place of the golden eagle.

The island's only national park is the Parco Naturale dell'Etna (see p208), which was set up to protect the volcano from the spread of development threatening its slopes up to the late 1980s. Although there is still a sizable amount of unwelcome construction on the mountain, the area appears to be in good hands.

The salt pans of Trapani and Marsala are partially protected by the Regione Sicilia, while the long beach at Capo Bianco, near Eraclea Minoa, was purchased by the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) in 1991.

In 1986 the island of Ustica became Italy's first marine reserve and it remains a centre for marine research. The tiny isle forms the westernmost cone of the volcanic arc that makes up the Aeolian Islands, and like the six Aeolians, the marine world around Ustica is rich and varied. The Atlantic current through the Straits of Gibraltar keeps the water an incredible azure and attracts divers from around the world.

Sicily's other notable sea reserve is centred around the Egadi Islands (see p113), made up of three islands: Favignana, Levanzo and Marettimo. All the islands are ringed with caves and creeks, making other excellent diving spots.

The Aeolian Islands are not a designated natural park although they are a listed World Heritage site, protected for their unique volcanic characteristics. However, their World Heritage status was threatened by a shocking proposal to develop seven new hotels. The controversial project was approved by the Sicilian parliament in October 2004 but has since been shelved thanks to massive opposition to the project.

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Sicily is a dramatically beautiful island, with some of the most splendid scenery to be found anywhere in Europe. Yet humans seem to have done their very best to spoil the natural legacy of the island, both on land and off. One of the big environmental issues in Sicily is the fast depletion of tuna fish off the western coast. Traditionally, tuna traps were set around the coast of Sicily once a year; the scale of tuna caught by this method was relatively small and sustainable, but problems arose with the increase in Japanese commercial fishing in the 1960s, when tuna started being fished year-round and deep waters were exploited using indiscriminate fishing methods that ignored seasons and marine life cycles, thus depleting the oceans' resources.

Throughout most of the 20th century industrialisation and urbanisation resulted in pollution problems that have yet to be dealt with adequately. In Palermo and Catania car emissions poison the atmosphere, creating a yellow smog that is clearly visible on a summer's day. The seas surrounding the island, and therefore many of the beaches, have been fouled to some extent, particularly in the industrialised areas around Gela, Porto Empedocle, Augusta and Trapani, where it is inadvisable to go swimming. Aesthetically, these areas represent shameful scars on the island's otherwise pristine coastlines.

A way in which you can help during your visit is to limit your water usage, as Sicily is often plagued by water shortages in high summer. This is especially the case on the Aeolian Islands and particularly on Stromboli, where huge water tanks are brought to 'feed' the population and growing tourist numbers. Thus, don't leave the water running more than you need to and take showers, not baths.

Sicilians as a whole do not help matters greatly. Although deeply proud of their island, they discard rubbish where and when they please, something that will undoubtedly alarm most litter-conscious visitors.

Since the end of WWII, another major problem on the island has been that of illegal construction, known here as *case abusive* (literally 'abusive houses'). Many of the more modern houses built throughout the island, including most of those in the ugly suburbs that plague Sicily's cities, were constructed illegally. Once the authorities got around to checking whether the builders had permits or not, they were presented with a *fait accompli* and took no further action. Perhaps the most appalling example of this is in the famed Conca d'Oro valley around Palermo, once the Arabs' paradisiacal garden overflowing with citrus trees and olive groves. Today many of the trees have disappeared and the valley is ruined by overdevelopment.

Throughout the rural interior you will see plenty of houses that look half-built, with exposed brick and large metal girders jutting out through the top of the roofs. Plaster façades are intentionally left off to avoid incurring taxes on 'finished' houses, while the ugly girders exist in case the owners' children marry and decide to move in: a 2nd floor is added to the house and the newlyweds simply move upstairs. Although these practices spoil the environment, it must be remembered that they are often born of necessity. Sicilians are by and large not wealthy so they make do with what they have, especially in the poorer rural communities.

The government's record on ecology is poor. The Ministry for the Environment was created only in 1986, and many environmental laws are either badly enforced or ignored altogether. Recycling is almost completely unheard of in Sicily, although in the larger cities you will find the occasional bottle bank – far too few to make any considerable difference, however.

There are many subtle references to the sea's fish depletion in Emanuele Crialesi's 2002 film *Respiro*, in which the fishermen fleetingly discuss the damage of deep-sea fishing.

Sicily is to host the world's first power plant that harnesses solar energy and uses it alongside natural gas as a source for generating electricity. Known as the Archimedes project, the plant is planned to be built near Syracuse and will cost €40 million.

Visit www.parks.it (in Italian and English) for further information on Sicily's parks.

Watch, or rewatch, Michael Radford's wonderful film *Il postino*. It was filmed largely on the impossibly beautiful Aeolian island of Salina.

Sicily Outdoors

In *Il gattopardo* (The Leopard), Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa compares Sicily's landscape to a stormy sea of constantly changing colours and moods. Few descriptions so aptly encapsulate the diversity of the island, where a day's drive can take you from a Mediterranean coastline lined with fragrant *maquis* (North African brush) to the charred slopes of Etna or the green oases of the Nebrodi and Madonie parks. Increasingly, travellers are seeking out these hidden corners of the island, opting to stay in *agriturismi* (farm stays), spending their days hiking or riding amid beautiful farmland.

The wonder of Sicily is that there is so much that one could do. You can ride or hike through Etna's national park, enjoy the wildly varied landscapes of the Aeolian Islands, each completely different from the others, or scuba dive in the marine reserves of Ustica, the Egadi Islands or fabulous Pantelleria. And if you've had enough of salty hair and sunburnt skin, head inland to the mountain-fresh sanctuaries of the Madonie and Nebrodi parks, where an almost alpine climate makes you feel like you're in a different country. The contrasts are startling and enjoyable.

What's more, the authorities are finally waking up to the preciousness of Sicily's wilderness and more efforts are being made to protect the coast and countryside, if only for commercial reasons. This works well with the strong island tradition of small-scale farming and the parks provide employment for local communities. But this is very much a work in progress and aside from Etna park, infrastructure tends to be haphazard and sometimes poorly organised. Don't let this put you off – the rewards far outweigh the minor inconveniences you may encounter.

HIKING

There are several hiking opportunities in Sicily. The biggest draws for hikers are the Parco Naturale Regionale delle Madonie (p139) and the Parco Regionale dei Nebrodi (p142). The Madonie is the more popular of the two and is therefore better organised (maps can be obtained in the tourist offices of Palermo and Cefalù). Nebrodi, on the other hand, is well off the beaten track, beautifully remote but poorly signposted. The Nebrodi and Madonie nature reserves offer the hiker a completely different experience: gently wooded mountains full of wild flowers and the Heidi-style tinkling of cowbells. The Nebrodi mountains, 'the mountains of the fawn', contain the largest remaining beech forest in Europe and a wonderful lake circuit (see the boxed text, p143).

Another fantastic area for walking is the often overlooked western coast of Sicily, home to Sicily's first nature reserve, the Riserva Naturale dello Zingaro (p104). The most organised reserve for walkers, this is a beautiful swathe of coastline dotted with picturesque coves and well-planned walking trails (maps available at the ticket office). The least discovered, however, is in the southeast of Sicily – the wildly overgrown Valle dell'Anapo (p227), where you can clamber around the Bronze Age cave dwellings of Pantalica.

The best time for hiking is undoubtedly spring, when the flowers are in bloom and the landscape retains a rich, green flush. Early autumn is also good for the Madonie and Nebrodi parks – the temperatures remain high on the coast, but a lovely coolness descends inland. Autumn walking also offers up a wildly different aspect of the landscape: shades of gold contrast with freshly ploughed, chocolate-brown fields, and of course it is the time of grape harvest in the island's vineyards.

Log on to the website of Ente Fauna Siciliana, www.entefaunasiciliana.it (in Italian), for all manner of naturalistic tours and treks.

Landscapes of Sicily by Peter Amann is a handy little pocket-size book full of walks and driving tours around the island.

If planning to walk in the Madonie mountains get hold of the 1:50,000 *Madonie/Carta dei Sentieri e del Paesaggio* from the tourist office in Palermo or Cefalù, or the park headquarters in Petralia Sottana.

WALKING HOLIDAYS & GUIDED WALKS

The most reputable UK-based company offering walking tours in Sicily is **Think Sicily** (www.thinksicily.co.uk). It runs three very lovely walks covering the west, the Madonie, and the Aeolians and Nebrodi park combined. Trails are led by multilingual, native Sicilians and combine nature and culture in equal measure. Another quality walking-tour operator is **Tabona & Walford** (www.tabonaandwalford.com; ☎/fax 020 8767 6789; www.tabonaandwalford.com; 19 Crockerton Rd, London, SW17 7HE).

Guided treks can also be organised on the ground with **Magmatrek** (www.magmatrek.it; Stromboli), **Ente Fauna Siciliana** (www.entefaunasiciliana.it in Italian; Noto & Syracuse), **Eolie Adventure** (www.eolieadventure.com; Salina), **Gruppo Guide Alpine Etna Sud** (www.guidealpineetna.it; ☎/fax 095 791 47 55; Via Etna 49, Catania) and **GeoEtna Explorer** (www.geoetnaexplorer.it; Catania). See the relevant chapters for full details.

VOLCANO CLIMBING

The serious climber will relish the chance to ascend a volcano, and Sicily has these aplenty! The Parco Naturale dell'Etna (p208), established in 1987, covers some 590 sq km and includes 20 different communities. The park is fascinating, both for its varied natural environment and its surreal summit. The other two volcanic experiences are on the Aeolians, where there are trails up Vulcano – a bald, sulphurous boil of a cone – and Stromboli, whose constant pyrotechnics seen against a velvet night sky take some beating (see p176 for details). If you do plan on walking up either Etna or Stromboli, remember that they are both active volcanoes and walkers are strongly advised to seek up-to-date information on their activity and stick to designated safety zones. Try local tourist and trekking agencies for current information.

Mt Etna (p208) is usually at the top of everyone's list for good reason, and aside from the hour-long tour of Bocca Nuova included in every summit ticket, you can spend several days trekking around the 165km circumference of the mountain. The most extensive trek is the *altomontana* (high trail): traversing the wooded slopes of the volcano from Rifugio Brunek to Rifugio Sapienza, at altitudes of between 1300m and 1800m, takes three days (see the boxed text, p143).

It is also possible to walk right across the mountain from Piano Provenzano, in the north, to Rifugio Sapienza, in the south (seven to eight hours, 22.5km); and the Gruppo Guide Alpine Etna Sud takes small groups up to the Valle del Bove, site of the latest lava trail. A range of personalised tours can be organised with this outfit or a handful of other specialist companies (see p210).

Etna has its own microclimate, and generally the best walking is between March and April, and September and October. Trekking across lava fields under an unforgiving summer sun can be an uncomfortable experience. At higher altitudes (above 2000m) a mountain climate sets in, with strong – sometimes freezing – winds. Snowfall is common between November and April when the mountain is transformed into a skiing destination (see p73 for details).

On the Aeolian Islands (p149), the trek up Vulcano is easily done on your own, while the trek up Stromboli is really enriched by the Magmatrek guides (see p178). By contrast, Salina is the greenest of the islands and is a pleasant change after all that fire and brimstone. Pantelleria is another paradisiacal setting, with treks ending in mud baths and natural saunas.

CYCLING

Cycling in Sicily is not for the faint-hearted. Much of the terrain is mountainous and most of the surrounding islands are the vertical cones of sub-merged volcanoes.

In the Middle Ages Christians believed that Vulcano's crater was the entrance to hell.

Mt Etna is ringed by a series of good riding stables and trails (see p209 for more details). Ask at the tourist office for the booklet *Itinerari a Cavallo*, which gives details of all the stables and the itineraries they run.

CYCLING HOLIDAYS

A number of organisations specialise in self-guided tours of Sicily. **Hooked on Cycling** (www.hookedoncycling.co.uk/Italy/Western_Sicily/western_sicily.html) offers a classic itinerary of Western Sicily, as does **Exodus** (www.exodus.co.uk/activities/cyclingitaly.html). **Scottish Cycling Holidays** (www.sol.co.uk/s/scotcycl/) also does the western route but offers two others: around Taormina, and Syracuse and the southeast.

For those with a recreational interest in cycling, the best area is the relatively flat western coast. Hiring a bicycle on Favignana in the Egadi Islands is a great day out and only costs €5, while the salt pans west of Trapani are flat. Likewise, Syracuse is a cycle-friendly city.

Most cyclists concentrate on routes around Mt Etna (p208), which offer excellent views from every angle. The most popular circuit is a complete loop (121km) around the volcano from Catania (p196), through Linguaglossa, Randazzo and Bronte to Rifugio Sapienza at the summit. Here you take your own time visiting the craters. You can also detour to Rifugio Brunek on the northeastern flank, a route that wends its way through verdant oak, chestnut and pine forests.

A more adventurous itinerary through rural Sicily is to bus your way to Enna (p241) in the centre of the island and then freewheel through Agira, Troina and the Parco Regionale dei Nebrodi. Alternatively, the southeast corner of the island around Syracuse (p214) and the west of the island around Trapani (p105) offer some more gentle routes. The west of the island, in particular, offers the least demanding route alongside some wonderful scenery and sights, taking in Scopello (where you can go walking in the Riserva Naturale dello Zingaro, p104), medieval Erice, the Trapani salt pans, Marsala's vineyards and the gorgeous classical site of Selinunte.

It is possible to ride almost all year round, bar the peak of summer (August) and during the dreary winter rain (December to February). If you are planning a trip over Easter, make sure you make all the necessary bookings beforehand, as Sicily is jam-packed in Easter week.

The most versatile bicycle for most of the roads here is a comfortable all-terrain bike capable of travelling over both paved and country roads. You may well find that you are travelling along isolated roads, so it's wise to be equipped with a kit for essential repairs. Always wear a helmet and have a detailed map of the area.

Hazards on the road are manifold. Off the main routes, roads can be narrow and in summer traffic is quite heavy. Also, Sicilians think nothing of overtaking on hairpin bends so you will need your wits about you. In the cities you will have to adapt to the Sicilians' lack of cycle-awareness. Bikes are not common here and few concessions are made for cyclists. You will also have to negotiate the daredevil scooter riders, an exhausting and ever-present hazard on the roads.

Sicily's two major road races both take place in March. The Rofeo dell'Etna is a 200km circuit around the mountain, and the Rofeo Pantalica, a 170km race near Syracuse.

DIVING & SNORKELLING

Sicily is a diver's paradise and its volcanic geography ensures that the surrounding waters teem with a wide variety of fish and a colourful marine landscape. The crystal-clear waters of Ustica (p100) remain the location of choice for hundreds of scuba divers and during the summer months almost the entire island is given over to some sort of waterborne activity. The **Marine**

For an outdoor holiday on an authentic working farm, check out the website www.agriturismo-sicilia.it.

FINDING YOUR WAY

The Michelin map 1:400,000 (series number 565) is a good all-round road map to the island and excellent for touring purposes. Cyclists should try to get hold of a copy of Touring Club Italia's (TCI) 1:200,000 *Sicily* map. The tourist office in Catania also hands out a free TCI map of Mt Etna and its environs: 1:175,000 *Province of Catania*. For Etna walkers, more detailed maps are available from TCI *Mt Etna* at 1:50,000 and the Istituto Geografico Militare (IGM; 1:25,000), although the latter are nearly 40 years old and show some misleading trails.

In the Zingaro reserve a good, free map (1:25,000) is available from the ticket booth. It clearly marks out all the walking trails and they are easy to follow. On the Aeolian Islands most maps use an old IGM 1:25,000 as their base. This covers all the islands of the archipelago. There is also an excellent clear map available from Litografia Artistica Cartografica (LAC), *Isole Eolie o Lipari* 1:25,000, which covers all the islands. The only detailed map of the Nebrodi park is the TCI 1:50,000 *Parco dei Nebrodi*, produced in cooperation with the park's administration. However, it is not totally reliable on the ground. The 1:50,000 *Madonie/Carta dei Sentieri e del Paesaggio* that covers the Madonie park is much better and available from Cefalù and Palermo Tourist Offices and park headquarters in Petralia Sottana. It costs €1.

Reserve Visitors Centre (☎ 091 844 94 56) is very well organised and there is even a signposted archaeological trail that divers can follow, with underwater plaques explaining your deep-sea finds.

The Egadi Islands (p113) form a marine reserve, with serious diving outlets such as **Atlantide** (www.progettoatlantide.com) operating archaeological and night dives. In addition the islands' fishermen have banded together to offer the tourist service known as *pescaurismo*, whereby you can hire out a fishing boat and explore the islands in between fishing for your supper. Given the remoteness of Marettimo and its relative quietness, the waters around the island are some of the most tranquil and clean in all of Italy.

You don't have to be a serious diver to enjoy Sicily, though: nearly all dive outlets hire out snorkels, and both the Aeolians and Taormina are given over to a more leisurely enjoyment of the marine world. Sure you have your serious outlets like **Diving Centre La Gorgonia** (☎ 090 981 20 60; www.lagorgoniadiving.it) on Lipari, but more popular are boat trips that tour the grotto-lined coastlines, stopping here and there for snorkelling and swimming. One of the best of these is the Grotta del Bue Marino on Filicudi (p180). Hiring a snorkel at **Nike Diving Centre** (☎ 0942 475 34; www.divenike.com) at Lido Mazzarò in Taormina (p193) to explore the gorgeous cove of Isola Bella or the Blue Grotto is one of the cheapest and nicest experiences on the Ionian Coast.

SAILING

Although every harbour of the island is chockers with boats, sailing is not such a feature of the Sicilian seascape – far too much hard work and not enough posing potential. Here the motorboat or *gommone* (zodiac; motorised rubber dinghy) are the crafts of choice and they can be hired out on all the islands. **Sailing Team** (☎ 0931 6 08 08; www.sailingteam.biz) in Syracuse is about the best and most serious boat charter on the island and it can tailor-make itineraries around Sicily and even as far as Malta, but they don't come cheap.

Pedalos and jet skis are a feature of all the bigger and more popular beach resorts.

SKIING

Strange as it may seem, Sicily has two winter ski resorts: in the Parco Naturale Regionale delle Madonie (see p140) and on Mt Etna (p210). The tiny resort of Piano Battaglia in the Madonie mountains has very limited

The most impressive recording of the *mattanza* ritual (the annual tuna fishing season) was caught on film by Roberto Rossellini, in his film *Stromboli*.

infrastructure: a few cosy refuges that rent out equipment, and two ski lifts. One takes skiers up the northern slopes to the Mufara complex (1856m) and its 3.5km of runs, while the other ascends the southwestern slope (Mufaretta; 1657m) with a short run of only 500m. It is a pretty place but there is no real support for inexperienced skiers. Cross-country skiing is also very popular in the forest.

Sicily's main resort is the summit of Mt Etna, which benefits from a good 3m of snowfall in the winter. However, the 2002 eruptions swept away the entire ski lift, which was still being reconstructed at the time of research.