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#vanlife

How social media
fell in love with life
on the open road

The new wave

Meet the acts hoping
to make it big at Iceland's
Airwaves festival

Cheeks of steel

Are facial workouts
the next big thing
in beauty?

By Norwegian
October 2017
Issue 58



Pure shores?

Two decades after *The Beach*,
we head to Koh Samui to see
how the island has transformed

Sicily

By Norwegian

Dominated by the mighty volcano Etna, this Italian island is also home to some of the Med's most beautiful beaches, an arts district worthy of Brooklyn and ancient ruins a gogo

Words / Sarah Warwick



The souvenir / CHOCOLATE FROM MODICA

They call Sicily the melting pot of the Med for good reason. Pretty much every major civilisation – the Greeks, Arabs, even the Germans – has invaded at one time or another. During the 15th century, it was the turn of the Spanish, and one quirk of their legacy can still be found in Modica – the last place on Earth where Aztec chocolate is still produced to the original recipe. No milk, no additives, just cocoa solids and granulated sugar pounded together at 40°C or less, and infused with citrus, herbs and spices. The result is a delicious, if grainy, take on the sweet treat. Grab a bar for you or a friend at the Bonajuto factory on the main street for around €2. [bonajuto.it](https://www.bonajuto.it)



The basics

- Sicily is an Italian island off the mainland's south-west coast – the “football” to its “boot”
- At 25,700km², it's the largest island in the Mediterranean
- It has very fertile soil, and is a major exporter of lemons, olives, grapes, pistachios, olive oil, beans and wine
- Norwegian flies to Sicily from Copenhagen, London, Madrid and Stockholm



The key areas

Palermo

Like an ageing courtesan, Palermo's façades are crumbling but she still knows how to show you a good time. Eat street treats at the Ballarò market; explore the *Quattro Canti* historic zone, and finish up in Kalsa for *aperitivo*.



Etna and surrounds

Dominated by “Mama Etna”, as locals call the smoking volcano, the east coast is home to Taormina, a seaside favourite with tourists since the 19th century. You'll also find second city Catania, with its captivating architecture, and a burgeoning wine scene.



The south-east

Many towns here had to be rebuilt after a serious earthquake in 1693. The resulting Sicilian Baroque style can be seen in Syracuse's old town of Ortigia; the Disney-like perfection of Noto; Modica's many churches, and Ragusa, setting for the *Inspector Montalbano* TV series.



The wild west

There's plenty to recommend in this under-visited part of the island, not least the lack of tourists. Take a cable car to Erice's hilltop fort; try wine tastings at Marsala's vineyards; spot flamingos flapping over the salt pans at Saline di Trapani, or laze on empty beaches.



The Aeolian Islands

This archipelago of ancient volcanic islands is a charming throwback to a simpler time, easily accessible by short ferry trips from Milazzo. Vulcano's mud baths and Stromboli's regular eruptions are highlights.



The postcard

TEMPLE OF JUNO

You'd be forgiven for thinking these remains are in Greece – and indeed, 2,500 years ago, they would have been. The Greeks conquered Sicily in the eighth century BC, and souvenirs from their 500-year reign include the Doric-columned beauties at the UNESCO-listed Valley of the Temples in Agrigento (Juno's Temple actually provided the model for UNESCO's own logo). Today the temples are one of Sicily's main tourist sites. Well worth a full day trip, but don't forget a sun hat and water. valleyofthetemples.com



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norwegian.com



Sightsee
like a don



Anyone with an interest in Cosa Nostra, AKA the Mafia, needs to pay a visit to Corleone, near Palermo. This town is famous as the birthplace of several of the biggest real-life Mafia bosses – as well as the most famous fictional one: Don Vito Corleone, the Godfather himself. The grandparents of Al Pacino, one of the stars of the 1972 movie, also hailed from here. Today there's a museum dedicated to the No Mafia Movement, which can be toured by pre-arrangement. cidmacorleone.it



The dish /

ARANCINI

These fried, stuffed rice balls can be found all over the island, but did you know this about Sicily's favourite snack?



The name means "little orange" – as that's what it looks like. In the east of the island, though, the rice balls tend to be more conical than round – said to be in homage to Etna.



The plural is always *arancini*, but on the west coast the individual balls are thought to be female and known as *arancina*, while in the east they're known as *arancino* – male. Go figure.



In the olden days, the rice was flavoured with saffron, and filled with simple cheese and ham or a ragù, but nowadays hundreds of different flavours can be found – even sweet Nutella or jam-filled balls. KePalle in Palermo has 23 different varieties – all delicious, of course.

kepalle.it

The design hub / FARM CULTURAL PARK

A decade ago, the town of Favara in the island's south was in fairly desperate straits: its buildings crumbling; its young people leaving. Then a local notary, Andrea Bartoli, and his lawyer wife, Florinda Saieva, bought up a clutch of ancient buildings in the old centre, and invited guest architects and artists to renovate them. These spaces were then filled with bars, bookshops and concept stores, creating a cutting-edge arts district – the "Farm Cultural Park" – that feels more like Brooklyn or Copenhagen than Sicily. "It's not that this is a unique concept, but usually you find these kind of places in big cities," says volunteer Fabio Di Benedetto proudly. Now squarely on the tourist trail, Farm has effectively saved Favara from ruin. "The town was just going to fall down," Di Benedetto says. "That's why it's so important." farmculturalpark.com



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Shedding
its skin



Palermo was once known as the “Golden Seashell” for the vast volume of oranges grown here, and Sicily is still one of the world’s largest producers of the fruit and its juice. The latter causes something of a waste problem for the island though, with over 200,000 tonnes of *pastazzo* (pith and peel) discarded each year at a cost of €16m. Now several schemes are working on ways to eliminate this waste, including Orange Fiber, a kind of silk made from recycled orange cellulose; a bread flour, engineered at the University of Palermo; and biofuel used to power farms in the island’s agricultural centre. orangefiber.it



The face / SALVATORE ALLEGRA

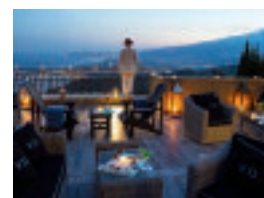
Salvatore Allegra has been taking pictures of Etna for around 30 years; his first, when he was just a child, from his parent’s holiday home in Mascalucia, a small town under the volcano. Since 2003, he has been supplying photo agencies around the world – Getty, AP, and others – with shots of the volcano’s eruptions. “If there was a recipe for a good photo of the volcano, the most important ingredient would be the knowledge of the territory,” says the Catania resident, who checks the National Institute of Geophysics and Volcanology website, and various webcams to keep tabs on its progress. He’s never had any near misses as he stays far enough away to avoid the unpredictable. “Remember that the volcano is alive,” he warns. “Always understand how dangerous a giant can be.” [flickr.com/photos/salvatoreallegra](https://www.flickr.com/photos/salvatoreallegra)



The kids /

GRANITA VANS

Carts selling granita, the authentic Sicilian take on a Slush Puppy, can be found on pretty much every beach. Vendors carry vast ice blocks, which they shave to order and top with syrup for instant happiness in a cup.



The stay /

HOTEL VILLA DUCALE

There are many beautiful hotels in Taormina, but Ducale is something special. From the terrace restaurant, the 180° view takes in Etna’s flank, the red roofs of the town and the vast blue bay beyond. Add five-star accommodation, home-made breakfasts, and a hot tub with that same stunning view, and you’ve got the perfect base for exploring the island’s east coast.

No head for heights? No worries – the Ducale’s sister hotel, Villa Carlotta, is equally charming and just above sea level. Book both through Small Luxury Hotels of the World.

slh.com/hotels/hotel-villa-ducale

Drink from
the volcano



Sicilian wine used to be considered table plonk, at best, or used to blend with other Italian grapes as filler. Not any more, though – various regions are now producing fine wines, and Etna in particular is getting a name for its minerally whites, such as Carricante, and full-bodied reds like Nerello Mascalese. Find out more on a tour of the volcano, where you get a chance to visit some of its 300-odd craters, hike across lava fields and then finish off tasting the local produce at a local winery. 🍷 winetourinsicily.com



The beaches

Sicily doesn't do palm trees and picture-perfect sunsets – its beaches are far more interesting, varied and characterful than that. Choose from flat sandy stretches, pebbly coves and dark volcanic bays, scattered over its 1,500km of coastline. If you make the effort, you can have one all to yourself – try the underloved sandy stretch in Lascari on the north coast – or follow our guide to some of the big hitters...

1. THE SOCIAL-MEDIA FAVE

SCALA DEI TURCHI

Named the Stair of the Turks for its dramatic limestone cliffs with their undulating "steps" (once a landing site for Moorish pirates), this beach has become a bit of a posing spot for Instagram influencers. Don't let that put you off, though – its sheltered sands and shallows are also great for kids.

2. THE TEXTBOOK ONE

SPIAGGIA DI MONDELLO

Just 11km from Palermo, Mondello is the closest Sicily comes to picture-perfect white sand and turquoise waters. Add the largest collection of Art Nouveau villas in Italy and a cool nightlife scene, and no wonder it's the island's most popular beach. Luckily, at 2km long, there's plenty of room for everyone.

3. THE NOISY ONE

CEFALU BEACH

Right in the middle of Sicily's most beautiful small town, and overlooked by several Capulet-esque balconies, Cefalu beach is a riot of gossiping locals, energetic ball games, and ear-splitting hawkers. While it's not the most relaxing place ever, you can't beat it for atmosphere.

4. THE GLAMOROUS BEACH

ISOLA BELLA

Nicknamed the Pearl of the Ionian Sea, this tiny island off Taormina really is a gem. Once a private home, it's now a nature reserve and makes a stunning spot for sunbathers. Wear your best togs and channel Sophia Loren or Matt Damon in *The Talented Mr Ripley* (without the murderous intent).

5. THE OUTSIDER

SPIAGGIA SABBIE NERE

Off the beaten track, the island of Vulcano feels genuinely exotic, with its bubbling mud baths, smoking crater and a black-sand bay. Take a boat trip around the island, or enjoy vast pizzas and cocktails served on the terrace at Hotel Conti, where sunsets feel more like Thailand than the Med.