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A Silician gazetteer

VOLANTE **Stanley Moss** has first-hand advice on travelling in Sicilia, \ more popular guidebooks don't tell you

PHOTOGRAPHED BY **PAULA SWEET**





Sicilian views are enjoyable, but don't trust your sat-nav

Here's what the guidebooks mostly don't tell you. Notes from a summer 2017 trip.

1. Get a driver. Sicilia is not user-friendly, wasn't made for leisurely cruising, and the easiest way to end your marriage is to try and navigate its ill-marked coastal roads together from the front seat of your moving vehicle. Sicilia has a trash problem. And Sicilian drivers are reckless, impatient speed demons, relentless tailgaters, fearlessly engaged in a perpetual game of chicken. Let the driver find the way and enjoy the scenery.

2. *Don't trust GPS.* What it says and what you find doesn't agree and the posted signs are no help. You'll burn up a lot of your overseas data plan getting turned around into nowhere using your mobile device. Keep to the main highways as much as possible. It took a half-hour of circling the back roads of Catania Airport to find the car rental return. Thank goodness we arrived three hours early.

3. *Car rental blues.* Our sporty little Fiat 500 with automatic transmission didn't have a lot of guts on the straightaways or hills; it was definitely photogenic. But our charming internet-based car rental expert had a big surprise waiting for us upon arrival at the airport—totally underinsured, though we bought every coverage he had advised in advance 'to take advantage of a special rate.' An hour and a half standing at the stifling rental counter trying to get our travel adviser on the phone to explain himself, to no avail. Finally gave in and paid the extra \$250 just to leave the airport with a vehicle. If you must drive, use Avis, Hertz or Europcar, and buy total coverage. Sicilia's roads are unforgiving.

4. *Don't try and book the trip yourself.* Don't trust any website that characterizes Sicilia as charming, not the first word that comes to mind. The internet is horribly inaccurate, and levels of quality and assessment will vary. Seek the help of a trusted professional travel agent familiar with the territory. There are not a lot of deals to be had, especially in high season. Prepare to pay top dollar all the time.

5. *Lower your expectation for the Valley of the Temples in Agrigento.* While awe-inspiring and beyond impressive, the major structures are off-limits to humans. You must stand behind barriers and pray that your loud fellow travellers stay out of your view finder long enough to snap your selfie. The whole world has become museumized. At the entry point, insistent guides confront you with aggressive offers. You wave them away. At the end of the sprawling one-hour downhill circuit, you exit through the gift shop.

continued below

















6. *Trust the people.* The *real* people, the local residents, are universally kind, hospitable and good-natured. The clerk who tried to help at the car rental counter. The man who guided us a half-hour through dark roads to our hotel we never would have found in a million years. The overworked hotel manager harrassed by everyone, who stayed late at his post to welcome us, and every day honoured our changable breakfast requests. The lady in the gift shop who wrote a thank-you note after we shipped ceramics from her store.

7. *Enjoy Modica.* Set in a canyon where a now-diverted river ran and once the island's capital, this picturesque city has the most famous chocolate in Sicilia, Bonajuto; their store on the main drag gives out samples, prices are reasonable, and you will find many gift packagings. Definitely have a meal inside at the Osteria dei Saporì perduti (Corso Umberto I 228–230,

Modica), real local home-style cooking, surrounded by locals; tourists dine at the outdoor tables and eat hydrocarbons with their meals.

8. *Visit Caltagirone.* The ceramic city, where you'll benefit from shopping at the source. Production pottery can be found all over the island, but here the best selection—including unique pieces—and pricing. The famous Moor king head is ubiquitous—ask about the folk tale and you'll hear multiple versions. A worthy souvenir to take home.

9. *Drink the local wines.* A native advises, stick to Nero d'Avola, Nervo Moscalese and Frappato.

10. *Have lunch at Marzamemi fishing village.* You need to walk along the waterfront to the old port where traditional buildings now house colourful clothing shops and little fried food stands. You'll get a sense of the way life used to be. •









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