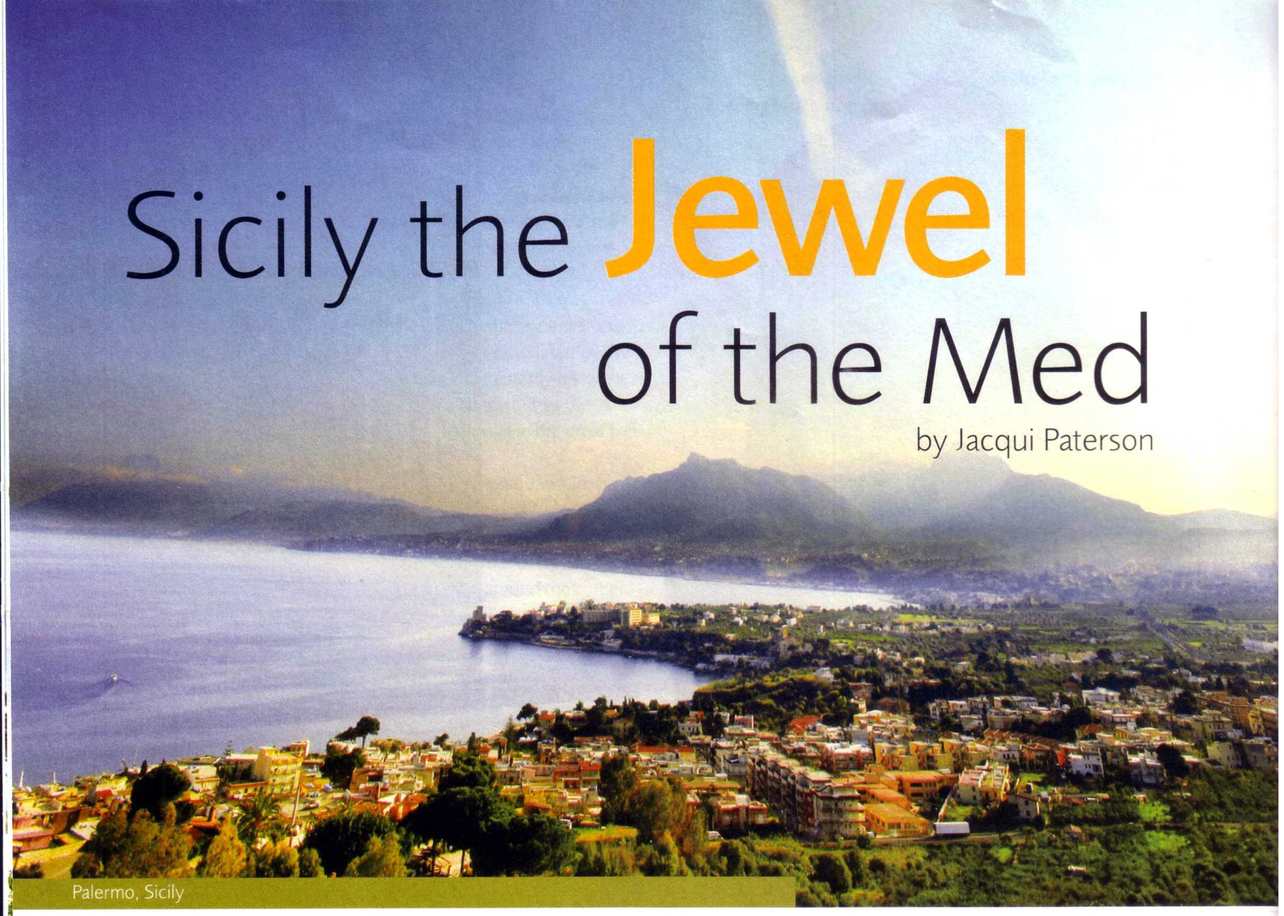
Sicily the Jewel of the Med

by Jacqui Paterson



Palermo, Sicily

Aged old men in wide hats look up from their domino games, while the women wander past with bags of fresh bread and pasta. Some places never live up to your expectations, but Sicily completely exceeds them. Stunning landscapes, gorgeous food, and an old world charm that hasn't been worn away by a constant stream of tourists.

Jacqui Paterson tells us of her Sicilian experience.

Sicily is the largest island in the Mediterranean. Though a region of Italy, it is autonomously run, and is separated from the mainland by the Strait of Messina. Over the centuries the Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Normans, and the Spaniards have all claimed the island as their own.
It's this collision of cultures, tastes and traditions that makes Sicily so unique. You'll find North African architecture alongside Norman cathedrals, overlooking ancient Greek amphitheatres. Even the famed local dessert cannoli, fried pastry dough filled with sweetened ricotta cheese, originated from an Arabic dish.

A very Sicilian History

Islanders also have their own language. Sicilian is a curious mix of Greek, Arabic, French, Latin and Spanish. But before you throw out your phrase book, most residents speak Italian, and usually a little English too.

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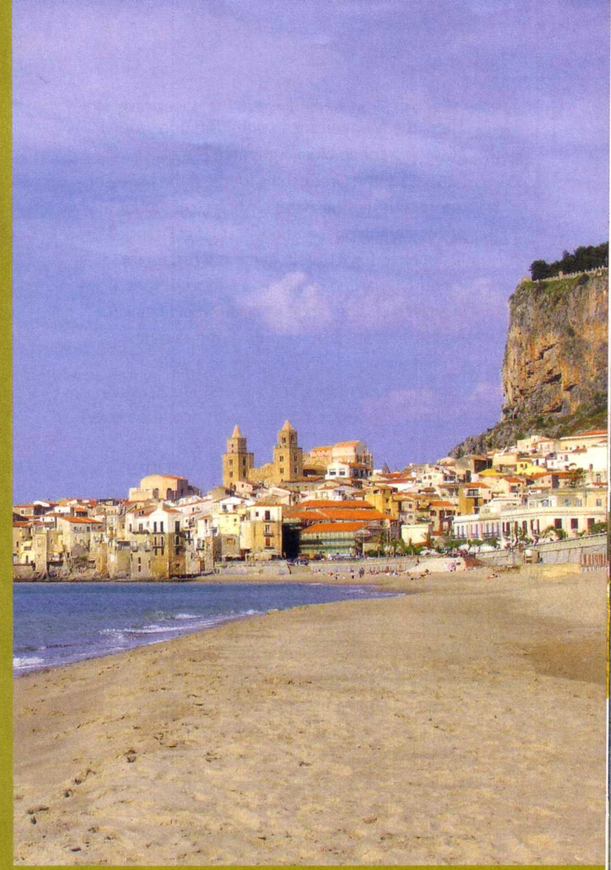
Locals are fiercely proud of their island, which is much less commercialised than the touristy cities of Italy. You won't find rows of 5-star hotels or glitzy shopping malls, so you get a much more authentic taste of Sicilian life.

Sicilians don't deny their Mafia history, but over the last decade serious efforts have been made to loosen the grip of organised crime. It's a fascinating history, and you should definitely include some mafia spots on your itinerary. The town of Corleone, 37 kilometres south of Palermo, is instantly recognisable from "The Godfather". Upon arriving in America "Vito Andolini" adopted his hometown as his surname to become "Don Corleone".

Capitals and Catacombs

Palermo is the biggest and best known city of Sicily. It's often compared with Naples, which is notoriously gritty. But while Palermo is lively, it has a friendly vibe and a ramshackle beauty that Naples doesn't. There are must-see tourist attractions when you are in Palermo, including the stunning Cathedral of Monreale, 15km south of the city. But if you're interested in something quite fascinating, head to the Capuchin Catacombs in Piazza Cappuccini.

This unusual cemetery was originally built in 1599 for Capuchin monks, whose bodies were preserved by dehydrating them in special cells. Today their mummified remains are bizarrely displayed along the walls, layered in shelved wall niches, and strapped to the walls wearing the clothes in which they were laid to rest.



Beach at Cefalu

Cappuccino anyone?

The name of the frothy cappuccino coffee is believed to have originated from the long pointed white cowl or cappuccino, meaning hood, which the Capuchin monks wore with their dark robes.

The charm of Cefalu

Explore the unspoilt beachside village of Cefalu, a popular seaside resort situated about 50 kms east of Palermo. This medieval town has it all — white sand beaches, clear aqua waters, a stunning Norman cathedral, and a harbour that reminds you this was once a quiet fishing village.

If you're feeling energetic you can scale La Rocca, the rocky outcrop behind Cefalu, for sensational panoramic views over the coast. Alternatively, you can visit Trapani, a popular diving spot with clear waters and dotted with the Egadi Islands.
The largest, Favignana, is home to Sicily's largest tuna fishery. Keen fishermen flock here in May and June for mattanza, the ancient Sicilian ritual that nets huge shoals of Blue Fin tuna as they swim past the coast.

Live like the locals

Agrigento, located on the south coast is a two-hour train journey from Palermo. Locals see the trip as a social occasion, laughing and chatting with each other as the train speeds through Sicily.
It's worth the journey just to take in the views, which are stark, and stunning. Simple stone cottages set amongst broad expanses of rolling hills, punctuated occasionally by cactus plants and silvery rows of olive trees.

Cathedral Monreale, Palermo

View from la Rocca, Cefalu

Then, the Mediterranean unfolds before you, glistening cobalt blue. Agrigento is most famous for the Greek ruins found in the Valley of the Temples. It's also the birthplace of Nobel prize-winning poet and novelist Luigi Pirandello. Just metres from his old home is a restaurant jealously guarded by locals. La Trizzera specialises in Sicilian cuisine, and its eclectic mix of Italian, Arabic, and Spanish flavours. From sardines stuffed with breadcrumbs, to pasta with chopped aubergines, and the delicious Cassata Siciliana – sponge cake filled with ricotta cheese.

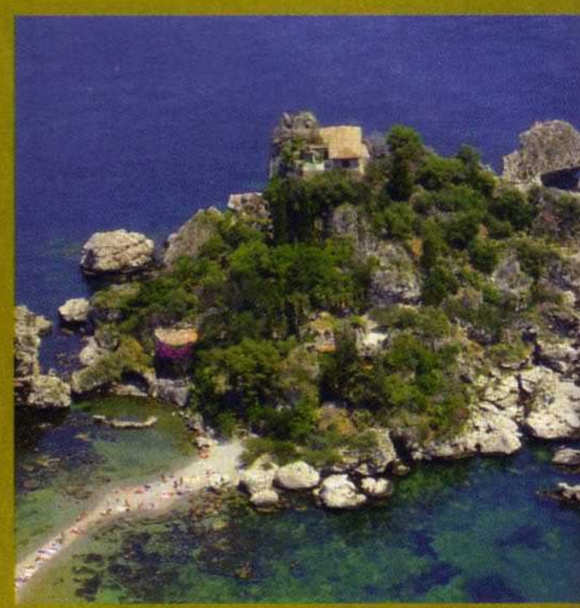
Europe's greatest natural wonder

The eastern coast of Sicily has its own unique attractions, including Mount Etna, in the region of Catania. This nature reserve is not only the island's highest point; it is also the most active volcano in Europe. There are various tours that will take you up the slopes of the volcano. Planted in the fertile soils surrounding the base are lemon and orange orchards. As you venture higher you'll pass craters, steaming fissures and rock grottos. Mount Etna has something to offer all year round.
In summer you can hike the volcano and visit the magnificent natural Alcantara Gorges, where the river has carved through the solidified lava flows to create spectacular channels and ravines. In winter you can ski the slopes.

Head towards the port of Messina, and you'll pass through Taormina — described by some as Sicily's Positano. From here you can still view the glow of lava streaming down Mount Etna's slopes at night. With winding medieval streets and sweeping views over the Ionian Sea, it's always been a popular resort. It's well equipped for tourists, with bars, restaurants and beaches, but like the whole of this unique island, it still retains its unforgettable Sicilian charm.

It takes about three and a half hours to drive the length of Sicily, from Messina to Trapani. During this time you'll see everything from bustling cities to tiny villages; from arid valleys, to the deep blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea. Whether you visit for the people, the history, the food, or the views, the magic of Sicily will stay with you long after your tan has faded.

Taormina



View of Mount Etna

Jacqui Paterson is a travel and features writer who has recently returned from two months in Italy.

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