



WORDS ELISABETH KING

SICILY, NOT SO MUCH MAFIA AS MARSALA

There's something darkly thrilling about having a prejudice confirmed. The first time I visited Sicily, a thief nicked my bag as I walked along a quiet street in Siracusa. But over the past decade the largest island in the Mediterranean has taken major steps to shed its Mafia-dominated image with well-publicised police stings that have netted as many local polities as mobsters.

Forget guidebooks. The best tome to pack for a first time visit is *Midnight in Sicily* by Peter Robb. A former teacher from Melbourne, he penned what *The Economist* described as "simply the best book in English about Italy" in 1996. Robb lived in Naples for 15 years and, although the award-winning book is a quick study in Mafia infrastructure, it's not a Sicilian version of *Underbelly*. The island's history, art, food and traditions are explored in a compelling style that

1.2 million inhabitants, and the city is as gritty as it is vibrant.

The traffic can be horrendous, but even if the streets are gridlocked I never miss a visit to the city's famous outdoor market, the Vucceria, where the displays of local cheeses and fish form ready-made photo ops. I have never had the guts to order one popular local snack, pane ca' meusa, or veal spleen sandwich as we say in English, but still hope to build up the courage one day. Just the sort of rib-sticking fare for a long day visiting the glorious Norman palace, with its much-decorated royal chapel, the Capella Palatina, and the Teatro Massimo, the largest theatre in Italy, where Enrico Caruso trod the boards during the opening season.

The late 19th century is regarded as almost yesterday in Sicily, where the landscape bristles with the remnants of

and Attic 12 (attic12.com), both priced from \$90 per double.

British hotelier Sir Rocco Forte has revolutionised the five-star hotel scene in Europe with 13 stylish properties such as the Hotel de Rome in Berlin and Brown's Hotel in London. The group's outpost in Sicily is the Verdura Golf and Spa Resort, which is one hour's drive from Trapani and 40 minutes by road from the World Heritage-listed Valley of the Temples, home to the Temple of Olympian Zeus, the largest Doric temple ever built.

The guiding philosophy of the Verdura is "the art of simple luxury". Translation: six tennis courts, eight swimming pools, a vast spa, nine restaurants and bars, two 18-hole championship golf courses and 230 hectares of surrounding hill country, manicured gardens and evocative scrubland.

One of the best-preserved ancient Greek amphitheatres in Europe, complete with magnificent ocean views and the looming presence of Mt Etna.

matches Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* for page-turning readability.

There's a saying in Sicily that there are only good drivers because the bad ones are all dead. But a self-drive holiday is the only way you can visit any or all of the island's 23 major DOC zones, the largest number of official wine appellations in Italy. Dessert wines such as the world-famous marsala account for close to 90 per cent of local production. But the past 20 years have witnessed a huge uptick in quality of reds and whites from large producers such as Conte di Salapurata to small estates such as Fontanarossa and Donnafugata.

Palermo can be a shock even to regular visitors to Italy. Sicily's capital is a lot bigger than most people expect, with

Carthaginian settlements, Saracen forts, Norman castles, Roman amphitheatres and Greek temples. The best place for an historical quick study is Palermo's Museo Archeologico Regionale, one of Italy's foremost ancient history museums, which livens up the timeline from the Etruscans and Greeks through to the Johnny-come-lately Romans.

The Art Nouveau Villa Igiea (hotelvillaignieapalermo.com) used to be my default accommodation choice in Palermo, as much for its sumptuous interior as its spectacular sea views and surrounding gardens. But there's a new crop of upmarket B&Bs where the prices are well under half those charged by Palermo's grande dame. Two of the leading contenders are BB 22 (bb22.it)

Goethe first brought Taormina to the modern world's attention as a major stopover on the Grand Tour in the late 18th century; a colourful and aristocratic legacy that has ensured that Taormina has the lion's share of upmarket hotels from the Grand Hotel Timeo (grandhoteltimeo.com), renovated to its former glory by Orient Express Hotels, and its sister property, the Villa Sant' Andrea (hotelvillasantandrea.com).

Taormina's main attraction, apart from the incredible seafood restaurants and booming nightlife, is one of the best-preserved ancient Greek amphitheatres in Europe, complete with magnificent ocean views and the looming presence of Mt Etna, Europe's largest volcano, as a backdrop. A few years ago live

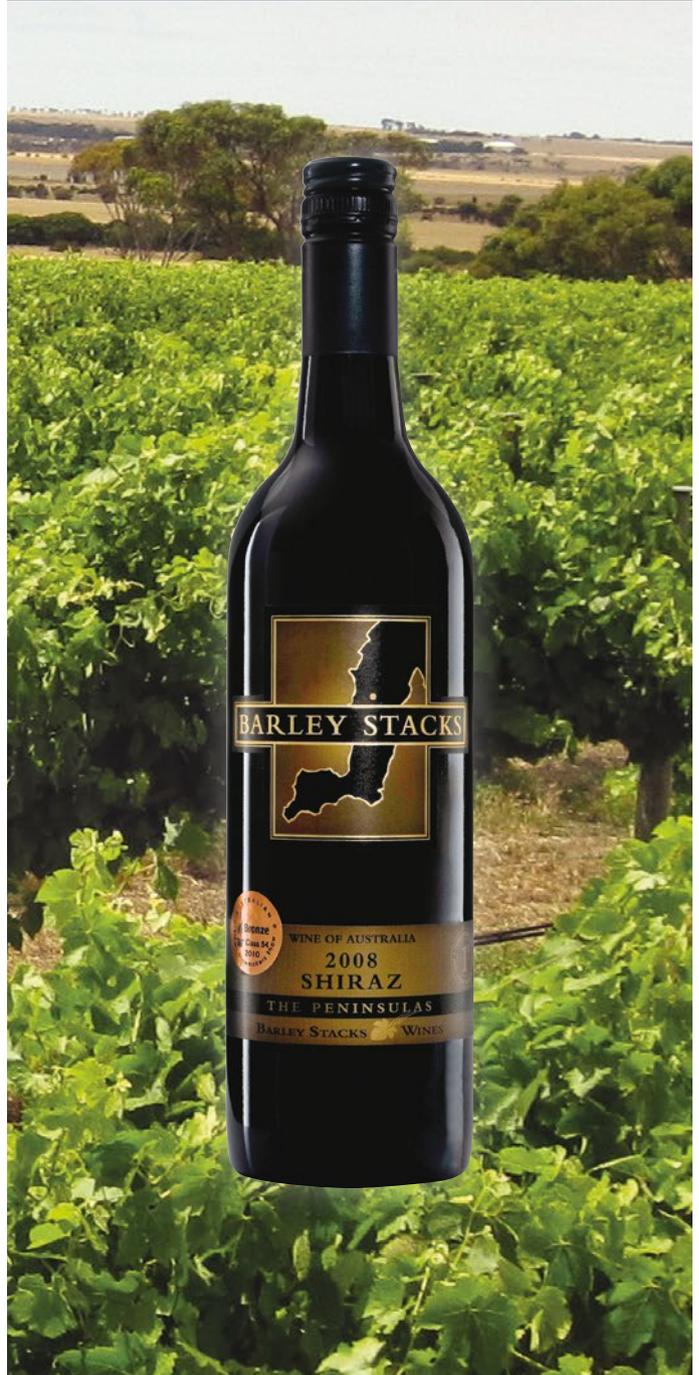
Barley Stacks Wines

performances again became a big part of the summer season in the town, including a sold-out concert by Elton John.

The biggest challenge when visiting Sicily is to jettison the idea of trying to “do it all” in one trip, unless you want your visit to be a series of drive-by photos. I once based myself in Ragusa in the south-west of the island for 10 days because there was so much to see and do. The town itself is one of eight places in Sicily listed by UNESCO, where the devastation caused by a massive earthquake in 1693 resulted in a rebuilding program that produced an architectural “riot” of Baroque churches, palazzos and villas.

Ragusa Ibla, the mediaeval part of the town, alone has 14 buildings and churches on the World Heritage list, and the only restaurant in Sicily with two Michelin stars - Duomo (ristoranteduomo.it). Chef Ciccio Sultano serves up delicacies such as spaghetti with sea urchin and asparagus and his ample yet attractive appearance would make him a shoo-in as a writer in any movie set in Sicily.

Segesta, a roofless, 26-columned ancient temple, ranks as one of the major drawcards in the un-touristy western part of the island. And, unexpectedly, the region also provides an insight into early 20th century Australian history. Marsala, Sicily’s most famous wine, is produced in these parts and today the region of Trapani grows more grapes than Argentina. As you drive through western Sicily many of the river beds are dry because their waters are used to irrigate the vineyards. It was a different story decades ago, when a series of droughts bankrupted local farmers. Many emigrated to Australia and the US to secure a better future for themselves and their children.



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