

**FROM LEFT:** Sarah and son Dash loved exploring Sicily; Teatro Massimo; the Martorana church in Palermo

## OUR SICILIAN ADVENTURE

What was the trip of 2016 that seeped under my skin and properly seduced me? Sicily, without a single doubt.

The boys and I land just after Easter – a glorious time to visit (if you're not too hooked on the idea of dawn-til-dusk pool lounging, which we never are), as the fields are bursting with wild flowers and all the exotic Catholic pageantry of the Easter festivities is still very much in the air. We're staying in the swoon-inducing Villa Lilibeum, just 4km from the centre of Marsala, as elegant as it is immense, with expansive pink plaster terraces and lofty white rooms filled with antiques. There's a cinematic grandeur and raw, physical beauty that just seems to envelop you when you travel around the island. Small wonder that some of the most sumptuous and atmospheric movies of all time – from Visconti's *Il Gattopardo* to *The Godfather* series were lensed here. As I write, the hotly anticipated *Mary Magdalene* – with Joaquin Phoenix, Rooney Mara and Chiwetel Ejiofor – is being shot at locations all over the island.

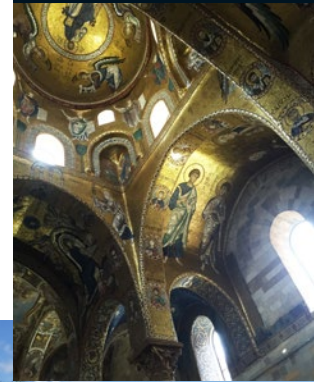
Marsala (the western-most tip of Italy and its closest point to Africa) built its fortune on the eponymous sweet, fortified wine; beloved by the British navy whose ships were often forced to languish in dock when the Sirocco winds took hold... or so one local storyteller would have us believe. The hot, dry

Saharan winds are also key to the local salt production and wooden windmills, whose silhouettes dot the skyline along the coast facing the magical Egadi Islands. I swear you can almost taste all this in the cuisine, which, unlike most Italian food, is sweetened with oranges and almonds and the subtle flavours of Africa.

In comparison with Taormina on the east of the island, or world-famous sites like Mount Etna, western Sicily feels wild and relatively undiscovered. Hiring a car is a must as there are so many extraordinary spots in the north-west of the island alone. A day trip to the imposing Doric temple at Segesta, then the vertiginously perched hilltop village of Erice (with its dozens of churches) is a perfect day itinerary. Heading north to the fishing village of Scopello, we enjoy a relaxed lunch in the baglio, a little way above sea level, and marvel at the rugged faraglioni (rock towers in the sea) from the old closed-down tuna factory – a coolly picturesque spot, where you can actually stay.

But the most beautiful, raw and seductive experience of all is Palermo, the capital city in whose Teatro Massimo *The Godfather* was filmed; where Moorish and Catholic architecture smash up against each other, oftentimes in the same extraordinary building. The city feels as battered as it is beautiful. Many of the antiquities are streaked and crumbling, but the streets – where you might buy a toffee apple or a sherbet-pink Palermo football shirt – pulse and hum. We say farewell to the island with a night in the old coastal resort of Mondello, where faded modernist pleasure palaces sit side by side with fairground attractions and lavish seafront restaurants. The local youths promenade with slickly pomaded hair in uniform black denims – all retro glamour and strut. Half-close your eyes and it's a scene from a Visconti film.

SARAH BAILEY



Villa Lilibeum

### Eat!

- Divino Rosso in Marsala for a hearty bowl of pasta con pesto alla trapanese, heavy on the almonds and the garlic.

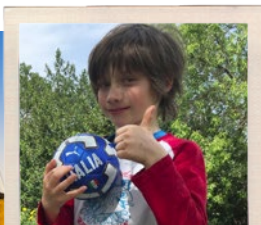


- La Pepita in Trapani for more elegant flavours and an urbane atmosphere.
- Gagini in Palermo for drinks, delicious eats and hipster-watching.

### TRIP NOTES

Seven nights at Villa Lilibeum from £1,290; [scent-of-sicily.com](http://scent-of-sicily.com). Flights from London to Palermo, from £46.99 with Easyjet; [Easyjet.com](http://Easyjet.com)

PHOTOGRAPHS GETTY IMAGES



**FROM LEFT:** Marsala windmills; Sarah's son Harry; the Temple of Segesta

