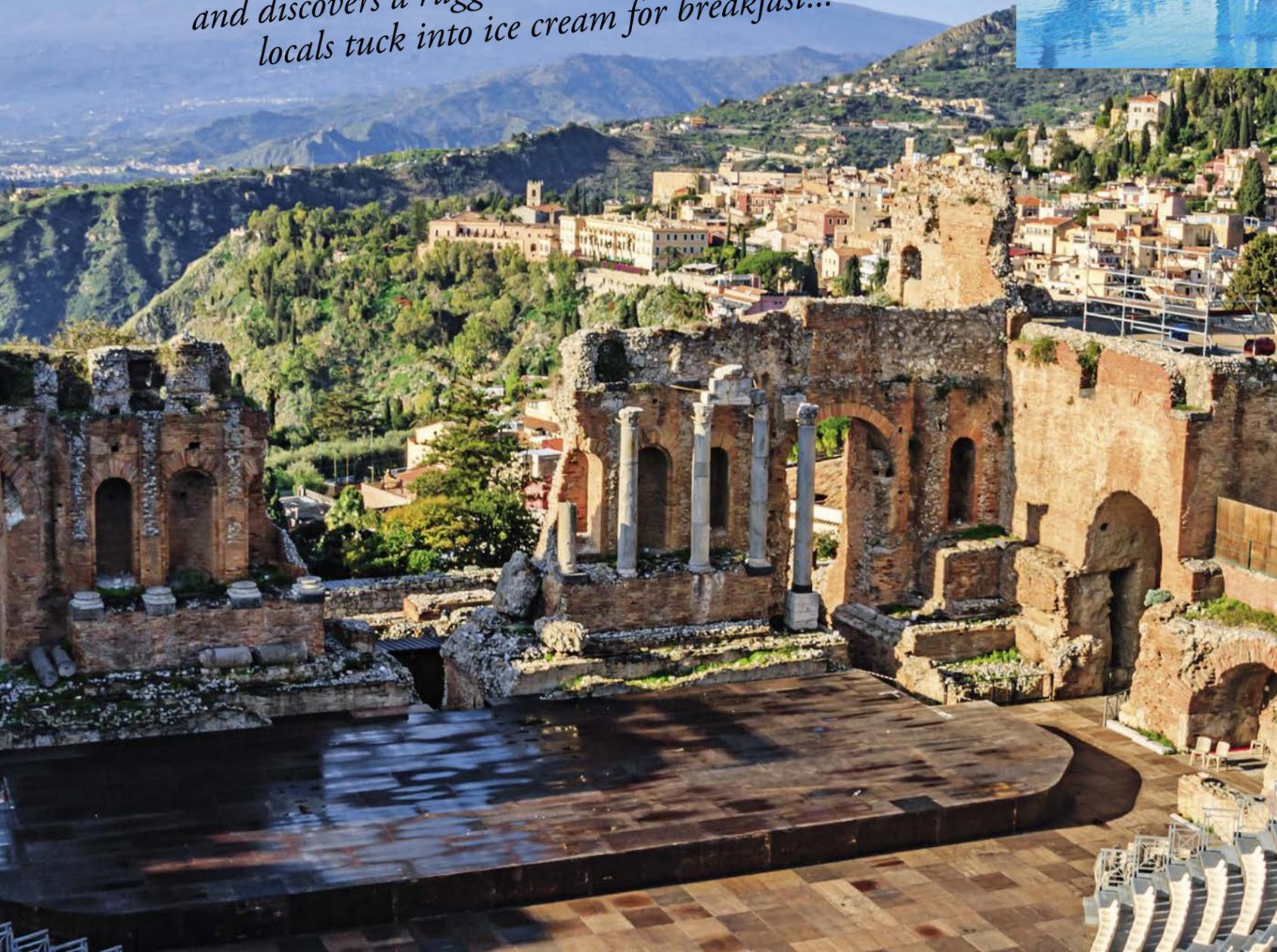


Ancient beauty

Leah Hyslop goes off the beaten track in Sicily and discovers a rugged, untamed land where the locals tuck into ice cream for breakfast...



Clockwise from left: dramatic Valley Of The Temples; the pool at Villa Mariella; Leah at the Turkish Steps; below right, five-year-old Rowan tries arancini



The night my partner and I arrive in Sicily, the most violent storm I have ever seen hits the island. Rain hammers on the tiled roof of our rented villa in an explosive symphony, while huge cracks of thunder rumble through the rooms, sounding for all the world as if Mount Etna, Sicily's active volcano, is on the verge of erupting. My partner and I huddle in our pyjamas, watching the pyrotechnics through the window, and praying the electricity doesn't cut out.

The next day, however, all is calm without a cloud in the sky. 'Sicily is about extremes,' laughs local cookery tutor Annalisa Pompeo a few days later when we exclaim to her about the weather. 'We don't do anything by halves – look, this is what we call a "Sicilian drop!"' She shakes a bottle of extra-virgin olive oil and a pool of golden liquid blossoms in the middle of her pasta dough. It seems I've got a while to go before I understand the ways of this ancient island and its people.

We have come to Sicily on a quest to get off the beaten track. After years of holidaying in France and Spain, I am keen to explore some of the Mediterranean's lesser-known gems, and southern Sicily seemed to fit the bill perfectly. Although the north and east of the island have become

increasingly popular with British tourists, the south is yet to take off. Rugged and a little run-down in places, it lacks the obvious charms of chic resort towns like Taormina or Cefalù. But what it does offer is a wild, untamed beauty, and space to breathe. On our off-season week in late September, we don't hear a single English voice and, despite temperatures in the high twenties, the beaches are almost deserted. Squabbling over sun loungers this is not.

Our home for the week is Villa Mariella, a quintessential white-walled Italian home in the sleepy seaside town of Seccagrande. Joining us are my two sisters and family friends with their two small children. It's a big, disparate group and part of the attraction of Mariella is that it is really a house of two parts. The main house has two en-suite bedrooms, while an apartment upstairs has its own kitchen, terrace and separate entrance. Perfect for everyone to have a little privacy.

The house is spacious, and well-equipped. I love to cook, and with most of Seccagrande's restaurants shuttered now the main holiday season is over, I'm relieved to find in the kitchen everything I could possibly want, from a cheese grater to an ice cream scoop. Hunting for a broom in the back room, I even find an umbrella and cool box for trips to the beach.

But the main attraction of Mariella is the outdoor space. The pool area, with its fluttering white fabric gazebo and hot tub, looks as though it belongs in a honeymoon brochure for the Maldives. But what I fall in love with is the mature garden beyond – manicured grass, sturdy palm trees, a miniature olive grove and a woodland area where you can swing in a hammock while pretending you can't hear the children shouting for you. In the distance, you can just spy the electric blue of the sea, less than a 10-minute walk away. 'I have lived all over the world, from Venezuela to Australia,' Giuseppe, the owner of the house, tells me as he shows me around the property. 'But I honestly think there is no coast more beautiful than this one.'

To truly appreciate Sicily, you need a car. The island is the largest in the Mediterranean, and offers a mesmerising hotchpotch of landscapes – bleak mountains, sunburnt fields of wheat, hidden coves and higgledy-piggledy hilltop towns where the houses look in danger of rolling down the slopes like beach balls at any moment. The locals' erratic driving takes some getting used to (there's that extreme behaviour again); I lose track of the times my sister Sally, the designated driver, shrieks 'We're going to die!' as a rickety truck laden with juicy oranges attempts to overtake us on a hairpin bend. But the fear is worth it. This is a place that feels ancient and wild, and somehow its own unique entity, rather than just 'Italian'. No surprise, really, when ▶



A local dish of squid ink pasta

Clockwise from right: climbing the Turkish Steps; Leah with her homemade pasta; and sampling quirky flavours at Palermo's ice cream festival with her sisters and family friends



you consider the island didn't become part of Italy until 1860.

One of my favourite drives takes us on the coastal road east to the Valley Of The Temples. Like Turkey, suspended between east and west, Sicily's strategic position in the heart of the Med made it a covetable prize for ancient powers from all corners of the globe. At different times it was the stamping ground of the Byzantines, the Romans, the Normans, the Arabs, the Spanish and the French, and remnants of their time are scattered all around. From about 750BC, the Greeks made a home here. The Valley Of The Temples was once the bustling city of Akragas; now, it's a 1,300 hectare park where the ruins of seven magnificent temples stand haughtily among fallen pillars and the overgrown foundations of catacombs and government buildings. Walking through this ghostly scene at sunset, where the golden stone of the temples glows softly, I can't help but come over a bit 'Ozymandias', filled with a sense of how quickly things crumble and disappear.

The food in *Sicily* is almost as big a draw as the *scenery* – a tapestry of *cultures*'

It's not just man-made monuments that catch your breath in Sicily. No trip is complete without visiting the Scala dei Turchi, or 'Turkish Steps', near the town of Porto Empedocle. This rocky cliff formation of stone so white it almost looks like the surface of the moon, has been naturally eroded over thousands of years until it resembles a staircase. Legend has it that Turkish pirates once scaled the steps to launch raids on villages. Now it's only tourists climbing up, to admire the contrast of the blindingly white stone and turquoise sea – though they can be just as scary as the pirates if you get in the way of their perfect selfie.

The food in Sicily is almost as big a draw as the scenery and, just like the landscape, it's a dense tapestry of cultures. Fans of Italian staples such as pizza and spankily fresh seafood won't be disappointed, but there are

other influences at play here. The iconic *pasta con le sarde*, or sardine pasta, is rippled with the Eastern flavours of saffron, raisins and pine nuts, while ice cream comes not in a cone but stuffed into a French-style brioche and eaten for breakfast (a tradition which provokes much glee among the children).

The locals are particularly fond of granita, a frozen dessert a little like sorbet, but looser and chunkier. In the Middle Ages, men would haul blocks of snow from the icy slopes of Mount Etna to nearby convents, where nuns would flavour it with fat Sicilian lemons. It makes me smile to see a pair of enterprising Sicilians continuing this refreshing work on the beach – shaving glittering shards off an enormous chunk of ice into plastic cups, dousing them with fruity syrup and selling the drinks to some grateful sunbathers. ►

Like all true Italians, the Sicilians are made up of at least 80% pasta. A few days into our trip, Annalisa pops into our villa to show us how to turn two basic ingredients – flour and water (plus a splash of good Sicilian olive oil, of course) – into homemade pasta. Under her expert supervision, our group masters two classic Sicilian shapes: *maltagliati* – raggedy squares traditionally made from leftover dough scraps; and *cavatelli*, which are crafted by squishing the edge of your thumb against a small circle of dough, so it curls into a cup.

Making pasta turns out to be a soothing, communal activity that even the children are dab hands at – in fact, five-year-old Rowan proves so talented that Annalisa shows her how to make a special ridged version of *casarecce* using a fork. (Rowan is extremely proud of this; later, whenever she sees someone nibble her signature shape, she shrieks excitedly, ‘That’s mine!’).

Sicilian cooking, Annalisa explains as we purée tomatoes for pasta sauce, is about tradition, but also about passion and individuality. ‘If you give 10 women a box of tomatoes, you’ll end up with 10 different sauces,’ she grins.

After a week of relaxing by the sea, it’s time to leave – but not before a whirlwind one-night stopover in Palermo. Sicily’s ancient capital is beautiful, but with a gritty heart; as recently as the early 1990s, its crumbling palazzos and labyrinthine alleys were a bloody Mafia battlefield, with crime lords and unlucky locals alike liable to be gunned down in the streets. Today, the city has cleaned up its image, and is more famous for its *arancini* (deep-fried balls of risotto, with mozzarella centres) than Godfathers – though you’ll still spot the odd, faded ‘No Mafia here’ sign in shop windows.

To the delight of the children and adults alike, our visit to Palermo coincides with an annual gelato festival and we spend an indulgent afternoon



Leah’s sisters, Sally and Rebecca, enjoy a sunset walk; left, the beautiful gardens at Villa Mariella

sampling extraordinary flavours (my favourite is chocolate orange flecked with salty capers). Then, after the sun sets, my partner and I sneak out from our hotel on a quest for the city’s legendary street food. In a tiny run-down square, we find locals queuing at a sizzling grill to buy *panelle* (chickpea fritters) and lumps of spleen (yes, really), served under a blanket of salt and lime juice. I’m not keen on offal, but this is delicious – and, as I munch my two-euro dinner on the steps of a church, I feel that I’ve rarely been happier. Like Annalisa said, this is a place that drives you to extremes. ■

PHOTOGRAPHS: GETTY, JASON KILLINGSWORTH

‘I honestly think there is no coast more beautiful than this one’



Sicily’s ancient capital, Palermo, is beautiful but with a ‘gritty heart’

GETTING THERE

British Airways and Easyjet both fly to Palermo from £30 each way. Sicily villa specialist soloSicily offers a week at Villa Mariella from around £2,800, sleeping 12 people. For more information, visit soloSicily.com.