

# ISLAND IN THE SUN

*Yvonne Gordon is smitten by the charm, heritage and vistas of Sicily, an island high on romance.*



*Mazgano Sea Palace*

## *Set the stage for romance*

With its central Mediterranean position, Sicily is a cultural hotspot having seen invaders from many different people – starting with the Greeks, and followed by the Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, Swabians, French and Spanish, all who have left behind their mark in everything from architecture to food. Drop into Taormina's Teatro Greco, which dates back to the 3rd century BC and was later transformed by the Romans into an amphitheatre for their gladiator shows. You can still see live performances here – you might catch an arts or film festival during your visit – and what a setting, with views over the sea, mountains and Mount Etna. Along the via Teatro Greco you'll find the perfect art, ceramics and local Sicilian crafts to take home as honeymoon souvenirs.



*Taormina, founded by the Greeks*

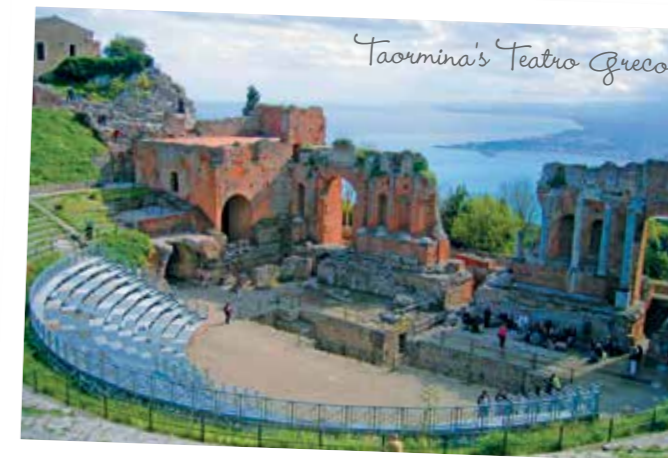
With its fascinating mix of classical art, archaeology and culture, its rich cuisine, its historic towns, plus a Mediterranean setting with golden beaches and glorious weather, the Italian island of Sicily is the perfect setting for a romantic honeymoon. Sicily is the kind of place where you can explore an ancient amphitheatre, temple or castle in the morning, take a boat trip or climb a volcano in the afternoon, and enjoy an outdoor musical performance or al fresco dinner on the terrace that evening.

Taormina, on the eastern side of Sicily, is a great choice for honeymooners. The town itself is set 200m above the sea on the side of Mount Tauro, with views over the sparkling blue Ionian Sea and across to Mount Etna. The old town's history goes back to the year 398, when it was founded by the Greeks.

A few kilometres below (reached by cable car which takes about four minutes, or by road), a good honeymoon base is the seafront at Taormina Mare or the neighbouring resort of Giardini Naxos, which as well as having luxury waterfront hotels and beaches, was the first Greek colony on the island and has an interesting heritage.

The small streets of Taormina town are full of atmosphere and romance, with voices echoing, birds chirping, tempting food smells and the strains of music filling the air. You can admire medieval buildings, churches and renaissance palaces on the main thoroughfares, while the tiny side streets and alleyways going up the mountainside or down towards the sea are full of tiny bars, cafés and restaurants where you can tuck into the freshest seafood and pasta and taste local wine. You'll see art galleries with outdoor displays on easels, collections of antiques positioned carefully on steps, and shops with designer shoes, ceramics, crafts and of course delicious gelato. High above, there are elegant lantern street-lights, bloom-filled balconies and lines of laundry drying in the sun.

Add the charming piazzas, an ancient amphitheatre, the view from the town's terraces at the Plaza Duomo over the bay, the sea and across to Mount Etna, and a mix of sandy and pebbly beaches to swim from, and you have all the ingredients for a perfect romantic holiday.



*Taormina's Teatro Greco*

## *Take your love to new heights*

Enjoy a leisurely walk up to the village of Castlemola, high above Taormina, for a long lunch and a bottle of local wine at a traditional Sicilian restaurant before browsing the shops or retiring back to your hotel pool for the afternoon. The 5km walk takes about an hour – or take a taxi up and walk back. A more energetic experience is to climb up Mount Tauro (378m), which takes about half an hour and has some steep steps towards the top – but you'll be rewarded with views down over Taormina, the Teatro Greco and the bay. There is a signposted path from Via Circonvallazione. The Taormina area has lots of other hiking trails, for all levels and all with rewarding views.



*Magnificent coastal views*

Mazzaro Sea Palace



### Silky smooth skin

Forget spa treatments and go for the real thing – a dip in the warm, relaxing sulphur springs on the island of Vulcano in the Aeolian Islands, which will leave your skin clean and smooth. Wash the mud off afterwards with a swim in the sea from the black lava sand beach. The Aeolian Islands, off Sicily’s north coast, make a lovely day trip – a drive north and then a boat trip from the coast to the main island of Lipari, where you can take a boat tour around the island to see the Cave di Pomice and the Faraglioni volcanic rocks in the sea before stopping off at Vulcano. If you pass the island of Stromboli, you should see some activity from its volcano which is nearly always active.

### A natural high

Mount Etna is one of the most active volcanoes in the world, reaching a height of 3,350m and with frequent eruptions – the most recent in December 2015. It’s also a UNESCO World Heritage site. Take a day trip from Taormina to Mount Etna and you’ll get to see craters, old and new lava flows as well as forests, citrus groves and unusual vegetation. You can go up the mountain either by the Etna Cableway which runs up to 2500m or by Land Rover and it’s possible to hike to other craters, depending on the level of trip you take. For an extra special day, stop at a vineyard or agriturismo on the way back to taste wine, local honey and olives.

## SEE CRATERS, OLD AND NEW LAVA FLOWS AS WELL AS FORESTS, CITRUS GROVES AND UNUSUAL VEGETATION

### Getting there

- \* **Aer Lingus** flies from Dublin to Catania (May to October, from €89.99 one way) and **Ryanair** flies from Dublin to Comiso (until September, from €40.99 one way) and Palermo (until October, from €55.99).
- \* **Classic Collection Holidays** has a honeymoon at the five-star deluxe Grand Hotel Mazzaro Sea Palace beside the beautiful Mazzaro Bay. Seven nights from €1,467 per person sharing or for a honeymoon treat, book into a sea-view junior suite from €2,174 per person sharing, all on a B&B basis including return flights from Dublin to Catania and private transfers. T: 01 541 3000 or see classic-collection.ie.
- \* **July and August** are high-season so Taormina can get busy, especially with visiting cruise ships during daytime. The best time to visit is either side of high season. ■