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Off the beaten track

Sicily is best known for its beach towns, but inland you'll find authentic culture, beautiful landscapes and a new plan to put a neglected region on the tourist map

 Words by Julia Buckley



Anna Tasca Lanza's cooking school borders the Tenuta Regaleali vineyard

Below right A delicious spread at the Antico Feudo San Giorgio farmhouse



Spend aperitivo hour on the terrace at Antico Feudo San Giorgio, and you could be in Tuscany – except for the lack of crowds. Hills tumble around the 18th-century farmhouse, rolling and rearing up towards peaks topped by Renaissance towns, with higher mountains beyond. But instead of finding Florence on the other side of these hills, it's the Tyrrhenian Sea that twinkles – just 30km away as the crow flies. It might look like Tuscany but this is Sicily – just not the Sicily we know.

"Guests are really surprised, they don't think of this as Sicily," says owner Fabiola Fatta, pouring homemade wine on her terrace. "They think of the beach – not of hills, countryside, farmland."

If you were glued to *The White Lotus* earlier this year, you'll know Sicily as an island of spectacular sea views, beaches, yacht-filled waters and grand villas. Even those who have been, are probably most familiar with the coast: the ancient Greek Theatre spilling down the cliffside at Taormina, the sun-baked salt pans of Trapani, and chic seaside towns from Sciacca to Cefalù.

But this is the Mediterranean's biggest island, with an interior larger than any other Italian region. That



means that Sicily also happens to have Dolomite-like mountains, Piedmont-worthy vineyards and those Tuscan-style hills.

Forget the coast, "the *entroterra* (inland) is the heart of Sicily", says Fabrizia Lanza, who was brought up on her family's estate near Valledlunga, an hour west of Antico Feudo San Giorgio. Lanza already runs the wildly successful Anna Tasca Lanza cooking school, founded by her mother – but the school, along with her cousin Alberto's neighbouring vineyard, Tenuta Regaleali, have long been tourist-attracting outliers in an area where few outsiders tread.

When the pandemic arrived, she came up with the idea of promoting the *entroterra* for tourism



for the first time. “I wanted to do something for the community,” explains Fabrizia. “I felt I could help people who don’t speak English. The idea was to set up a network to give visibility to other people.”

Her project, The Heart of Sicily, soft-launched last year, but is only really getting going, as the first few tourists take the short but off-the-beaten path inland. “It hasn’t been easy,” she says, “the area is completely unknown.” Centred around the Madonie mountain range, roughly an hour east of Palermo and 90 minutes northwest of Catania, it aims to introduce tourists to an area that, so far, is relatively ignored by outsiders. In Italy, the home of overtourism, this is big news.

It’s about time, says Salvatore Lo Iacono, a local driver who’s working with the project. Salvatore’s been ferrying tourists around the island for 10 years – and growing increasingly annoyed that nobody wants to venture inland.

“Very few tourists know the entroterra,” he says. “There’s vast potential here, but it’s barely valued. But when tourists do come, they’re ecstatic. They love the colours, the plants, how the landscape shapeshifts. They love the wild fennel growing by the roadside, the prickly pear bushes, the poppies and the *sulla* (pink wildflowers) in spring. From a naturalistic and cultural point of view, it has so much to offer.”

Certainly, this area has to be one of Italy’s most beautiful – and least spoiled – landscapes. In roughly

“When tourists do come, they’re ecstatic. It has so much to offer”

a 25km radius (though driving takes hours, the roads curling in and out of the hills), it goes from mountain peaks made from Dolomite rock to crags and billowing wheatfields. In ancient times, this area was known as “the granary of the Roman Empire”.

Dotted across this landscape is a network of local hosts who are ready to plunge visitors into this brave new world of mountain hikes, medieval towns, ceramics classes, cookery and cheese-making.

The idea of the project, says Fabrizia, is to “mix it up” – pairing her cooking school with, say, a mountain trek along medieval footpaths with guide Giovanna Gebbia, or a ceramics class in Polizzi Generosa, a hilltop town founded by the ancient Greeks and studded with Renaissance palazzos. You might eat organic food plucked from the garden and cooked by owner Pietro Genduzo at Agriturismo Cuca, near Polizzi Generosa, or walk through the labyrinthine Grotte della Gurfa caves at Alia, an hour west.



Clockwise from far left
Fabrizia Lanza and Filippo Privitera; Sicily's beguiling *entroterra*; Petralia Soprana is one of the pretty villages in Sicily's underrated interior



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Clockwise from below
Ceramics in Polizzi Generosa;
cheese made at Caseificio
Privitera; the farm at
Agriturismo Cuca



“It’s far from mass tourism, so this area has maintained its authenticity”

Sculpted from a rocky bluff above rolling wheatfields, these Bronze Age caves are, some believe, the tomb of Minos, the mythical king of Crete who died in Sicily. But Valentina Guccione, who brings Heart of Sicily guests here from her nearby organic farmstay, Dara Guccione Biofarm, reckons it’s a *granaio* – a millennia-old grain store. And she would know: her family has been growing wheat around Alia since 1860.

“This area is little known because we’re far from the sea, but the project is giving a voice to a rural lifestyle that’s often discounted,” she says from her garden, where visitors can eat home-cooked meals under huge trees and then doze in the sun alongside her dad, Gabriele. “It’s far from mass tourism, so the area has maintained its authenticity. We still have 1,000-year-old recipes.”

One woman who knows about those recipes is Fabrizia, who named the project after her mum’s first cookbook. “I wanted to reconstruct the narrative [of the island] to one that’s not about *The Godfather* or *The White Lotus*,” she says. At her school, students knead pasta, roll *involtoni di manzo* (razor-thin beef,



stuffed and skewered), and deep-fry *panelle* (chickpea fritters). They visit nearby Caseificio Privitera, a cheese farm owned by father and son Filippo and Enzo. Enzo looks after the family’s 400 sheep; Filippo makes the cheese. “The days I don’t make cheese, my wife asks me what’s wrong,” he says.

Wine comes from Tenuta Regaleali – no regular winery. Before tastings, guests go off-roading in a 4x4 around the 500-hectare vineyard, rollercoastering around perricone, nero d’avola and catarratto vines.

It all combines to create a picture that’s nothing like you expect from this famous island. “Sicily is an onion,” says Fabrizia, with a smile. “The more you peel, the more you discover.”

The Heart of Sicily has packages from €270 for three nights. theheartofsicily.it.

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