



Condé Nast Traveller

21st ANNIVERSARY
ISSUE

OCTOBER 2018 £6.50

READERS' TRAVEL AWARDS 2018

THE WORLD'S TOP 100

THE BEST ISLANDS, HOTELS,
SPAS, CITIES & COUNTRIES

**FRESH LOWDOWNS
ON CLASSIC
DESTINATIONS**

MEXICO, BANGKOK, NEW YORK, SICILY,
BUENOS AIRES, PROVENCE & TEL AVIV



Clockwise, from top left: Noto Cathedral; an interior at Countryhouse Villa Dorata; and the pool; art at Maison des Oliviers; a sitting room at Dimora delle Balze; and spaghetti



LEMON CRUSH

SICILY'S IMAGE HAS BEEN OVERHAULED COMPLETELY SINCE THE 1990S WHEN THE MAFIA OVERSHADOWED ALL TALK OF THE ISLAND. TODAY RETRO GRANDEUR AND PHENOMENAL FOOD ARE A GIVEN, AND NOTO – IN THE SUN-DRENCHED SOUTH – IS ITS LATEST DRAW, WITH HIGH-DESIGN BOLTHOLES AND THE WORLD'S BEST GRANITA

BY STEVE KING. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANA LUI



alla marinara; a bedroom at Maison des Oliviers; and the pool; the living room at Casa Vera; Maison des Oliviers; Dimora delle Balze; the pool at Maison des Oliviers



THE MENU in what may be the greatest pastry shop on the face of the earth is spelled out in plastic block-capital letters on a black felt board on a wall next to the cash register. The letters sit in furrows in the felt and can be rearranged by hand. They are clear and easy to read but unevenly spaced and misaligned, betraying a human touch – not carelessness but everyday imperfection, which I find extremely charming. Nothing on the menu is fancy or expensive. CANNOLI €3.00. GELATO CONO €2.50. Yet people come here – to Caffè Sicilia in Noto, a small, sublimely beautiful city in the south of Sicily – from all over the world to taste these things, to rhapsodise and obsess over them, and perhaps to catch a glimpse of the magician who, in the kitchen in the basement, conjures them into being. The simplicity and straightforwardness and elegance of that menu is, for me, an image of all that is marvellous about Noto.

I had breakfast with the man himself during a recent visit. Corrado Assenza is a spry, intense fifty-something with a high, intelligent forehead, a rakish white beard

and the eyes of a revolutionary. We sat at a table outside in the morning sun. I had – as you do, as you must – granita and brioche and coffee. I felt that complimenting Assenza on the food would be like thanking Verdi for the tune, so I asked instead about the view of the street.

Caffè Sicilia has occupied the same spot, diagonally opposite the cathedral on Corso Vittorio Emanuele in the middle of town, for 126 years. What was it about it here that pleased him most? For a moment he looked at me, with those blazing eyes, as if I had taken that dish of icy granita and clapped it upside-down onto his head. Then he smiled a slow, mild, gentle smile and said: ‘I like the freshness of the air before sunrise. The colour and the light and the sound. Not noise – sound.’ He stood up. ‘Come,’ he said. We took a few steps down the street and stood in front of the Chiesa di San Carlo on the next corner. He grabbed my elbow with one hand and with the other pointed towards a section high on the façade that was in full sun. ‘I like the stone. Stone is an absorbent surface. It takes in the sun and it gives it back in a different way.’

Noto used to be somewhere else. The original, ancient city, like many others in this part of Sicily, was reduced to rubble by a terrible earthquake in 1693 and rebuilt a short distance away. The most eminent architects of the day were engaged. No expense was spared. A compact grid was laid out with three main thoroughfares running east to west through the middle. The streets were soon filled with an astonishing concentration of churches, private palaces and public buildings in a luscious style now referred to, rather loosely, as Sicilian Baroque. ‘There are thousands of cute old towns all over Sicily and all over Italy,’ said local guide and historian Paolo Mortellaro, with whom I compared notes. ‘But none is cuter than Noto.’

Other Sicilians refer to people from Noto as nobles, regardless of their class. ‘Just being a native of Noto is enough to give you a sense of superiority,’ said Mortellaro. ‘You don’t have to have a coat of arms or lots of money. Look at the women. They walk like princesses. Most of them haven’t got a dime, but it doesn’t matter. It’s all about display, about looking good for the *passeggiata*.’ We were at

Above, from left: a courtyard at Seven Rooms Villadorata; roasted courgette with tomato and couscous at Dimora delle Balze; and the reading area; Marianeddi



Above, clockwise from top left: the lobby at Dimora delle Balze; the view from Marianeddi; and the dining room; olive groves at Country House Villa Dorata; Dimora delle Balze



Clockwise, from top left: Noto Cathedral; the pool at Maison des Oliviers; a room at Seven Rooms Villadorata; Maison des Oliviers; the sitting room at Dimora delle Balze



that moment sitting at an outdoor table at Caffè Sicilia, to which I had already become stubbornly attached. It was *passeggiata* o'clock. My only observation was that there were fewer women wearing black than I had expected. Didn't Sicilian girls generally wear a lot of black? 'Not so much these days. And I think the ones you mean are actually Austrians. Anyway,' he continued, 'the point is that, as Sicilians, our history is our trump card. Rome? Pah! One empire, that's it. In Sicily, we've had loads.'

The Bonaccorsi family – which, as it happens, does have a coat of arms – has been around long enough to have seen more than a few of those empires come and go. I was invited to lunch at their country house, Castelluccio, half an hour or so from Noto. Blue-eyed, raven-haired Luisa is a noted beauty (and fashion designer under her maiden name Luisa Beccaria); likewise her three daughters, Lucrezia, Lucilla and Luna; her husband, Lucio, is a card-carrying prince; their two sons, also absurdly good-looking, are called Ludovico and Luchino. The alphabetical resemblance is as pronounced as the genetic one. The chapel at Castelluccio was decorated

with long, thick, looping ropes of entwined wild flowers, left over from Lucilla's wedding, which had taken place almost a year ago. The flowers, too beautiful to remove, had been kept in place. There they were, still lovely and largely intact, as if the last of the guests had just departed.

The younger generation of Bonaccorsis, through no fault of their own, apart from having famous parents, photogenic features and all the trappings of what appears to be a charmed life, have become poster-children for a particular kind of Sicilian glamour that is very much of the moment, and very much focused on the south-east of the island, around Noto, Syracuse, Ragusa, Modica and Scicli (pronounced, of course, 'chicly').

The region seems to exert a strong attraction on those of a design-and-fashion bent. One such is Louise Trotter, creative director of Joseph. I felt terrible asking whether people like her – smart, cultured, with the means and inclination to colonise interesting places in their spare time – will spell the end for Noto. She is a deeply sympathetic and thoughtful person and came up with a wonderful answer to that

impertinent question. She and her husband discovered Noto nine years ago. They have rented a house in the hills every year since, among the endless olive, almond and lemon trees. 'When you fall in love with a place like this... it becomes part of who you are,' she said. 'I love it for its simplicity. It helps me recall the things that matter.'

She mentioned a beach she likes, Fontane Bianche. 'The local people know us there. They greet us, they squeeze the children, they probably look in their ears. There's real warmth, genuine affection. The kindness is heartfelt. You're absorbed into their sense of community and identity. My husband is Japanese and he feels completely at home here. If Sicilians accept you, they accept you fully. But,' she added, 'to answer your question about whether I worry about things changing, well, yes and no. Every year we've seen changes. But Sicilians are so proud of Sicily, so incredibly proud. I can't see them ever selling out. They'll stay true to themselves. The beauty of Noto, of Sicily, is everywhere, in the littlest, humblest things.' I nodded in silent agreement and thought of the plastic letters on the felt board at Caffè Sicilia. ⑦





'THE POINT IS THAT, AS SICILIANS, OUR HISTORY
IS OUR TRUMP CARD. ROME? PAH! ONE
EMPIRE, THAT'S IT. IN SICILY, WE'VE HAD LOADS'

On the streets of Noto. Opposite, a terrace at Dimora delle Balze



WHERE TO STAY

BY NICKY SWALLOW

SEVEN ROOMS VILLADORATA

The recent skyrocketing of delicious places to stay in the glowing, golden town of Noto can be credited almost entirely to Turin native Cristina

Summa, whose Seven Rooms Villadorata, opened in 2009, was a shot in the arm for the then underwhelming local scene. It occupies a corner of princely, early-18th-century Palazzo Nicolaci; anonymous double doors open from the narrow street to reveal a sloping, honeystone courtyard – the hotel is in the far corner, where all is calm, cool and rather grand. The look is mod-Baroque with flourishes and frescoes, original tiled floors, soaring ceilings, oversized chandeliers and gilded antique mirrors.

Rooms are named after the winds that sweep through this valley – Maestrale, Borea, Schirone. The best is Austro (once the prince's bedroom), a vast suite with magnificent views over the town through tall French windows, but the other rooms are lovely too. Breakfast – poached eggs, warm patisseries, candied citrus peel and moreish homemade almond brittle – is served on fine china around a communal table to the soothing sounds of Mozart. +39 0931 835575; 7roomsvilladorata.it. Doubles from about £175

COUNTRY HOUSE VILLADORATA

In contrast to her place in town, Summa's country pad, set on a hillside just 10 minutes

west of Noto, is all industrial-style minimalism and sleek modern design. This quiet hideout is made up of a series of cubic structures (a 19th-century olive mill and its outbuildings), surrounded by a Mediterranean garden of rosemary and juniper, larger-than-life spiky cacti, periwinkle-blue plumbago and bougainvillea and, beyond, olive, citrus and almond groves. Bedrooms have cement floors, rough putty-hued walls and shady verandas; the standalone suite comes with its own lap pool.

No need to stray far in the evening: feast on griddled octopus with pea purée, and rack of lamb with pistachio crust and organic vegetables from the garden under the jasmine-scented pergola. For downtime, there's a wonderful zero-entry pool, bocce (boules), in-room massages and walks in the 11-hectare grounds. +39 0931 340315; countryhousevilladorata.it.

Doubles from about £220

MAISON DES OLIVIERS

Design maestro Jacques Garcia, of Paris's Hôtel Costes, first came to this part of Sicily in 2011 to visit his close friend, the French documentary filmmaker Jean-Louis Remilleux (who has just renovated Noto's Palazzo Castelluccio, a classic example of Sicilian Baroque). Entranced, he set about looking for a property to buy, found the wreck of an early 17th-century monastery and

has now scooped up all the surrounding land – more than 100 hectares. The abandoned hilltop farm buildings have already begun their transformation into villas: for now, five-bedroomed Maison des Oliviers (originally an oil press) and the smaller Studiolo, which sleeps four, are available for rent, with at least four more to follow. The houses are stuffed with antique furniture, museum-worthy artwork and intriguing curiosities from Garcia's madcap personal collection: a rotating globe, carved stone columns with lions' feet and huge seashells.

Maison des Oliviers' living room even has a chunk of an original mosaic from Pompeii set beneath the glass floor. The impressive garden, created by Garcia's regular close collaborator Patrick Pottier (he helped design the garden at Garcia's own Château du Champ de Bataille in Normandy), is filled with exotic plants – towering sculptural cacti, frangipani, giant bird of paradise – and there's a long lap pool for cooling off. +39 338 281 7723; jacquesgarcianoto.com.

From £7,600 for seven nights

CASA VERA

It's all about plays on light and shade, a kind of architectural chiaroscuro, at five-bedroom Casa Vera, set in the hills 10 minutes from Noto.

Maltese design supremo Gordon Guillaumier took his inspiration for the streamlined interiors

Clockwise, from bottom left: octopus and grilled potato at Marianeddi; collectibles; and a bedroom, both at Seven Rooms Villadorata; art at Maison des Oliviers



Clockwise, from top left: Maison des Oliviers; Marianeddi; Noto Cathedral; art; a sunny spot, both at Casa Vera; Noto; a bedroom at Country House Villadorata



Clockwise, from top left: a detail of Sicilian Baroque architecture in Noto; artworks in the living room at Maison des Oliviers; Dimora delle Balze;

from the spare, vernacular rural architecture of the area with polished-concrete floors, handmade Sixties-style clinker tiles from Caltagirone and walls painted the colour of the local stone. A great slab of an oak table dominates the industrial-wood and marble kitchen where you could easily seat 20 for *caponata* and *pasta alla Norma* prepared by Simona, the in-house chef, although you'll probably want to eat outside. Elsewhere, the uncluttered, almost Spartan look is broken up by carefully chosen design pieces and an eclectic collection of artworks. There are sliding floor-to-ceiling windows, wraparound terraces and dining areas, shaded by slatted steel grills. A glorious cobalt-blue pool on a lower level makes the most of views that stretch down to the sea in the distance. Available to rent from *The Thinking Traveller* from £5,520 per week (thethinkingtraveller.com)

DIMORA DELLE BALZE

The Dimora delle Balze was a 60th-birthday present from owner Elena Lops's husband. She got goosebumps when she first saw the crumbling shell of a 19th-century masseria just north of Noto and embarked on a rescue mission that took the best part of a decade.

During the meticulous restoration of the manor house, its outbuildings and several cortiles, arched doorways were unblocked, Byzantine columns unearthed and fresco fragments revealed in cool, vaulted reception

rooms. Lops designed this retreat as a family home ('somewhere to have big parties'); it has only 12 bedrooms, but they come with a huge amount of communal space, both indoors and out. The place is filled with contemporary-design originals from Draga Obradovic, Luca Turrini, Flos and Kettal, which sit well with local market finds, handmade cementine tiles from Marrakech and banana palms in vast pots. After a hot day exploring the area, you can relax with a massage or kick back with a Campari spritz by the saltwater pool, surrounded by the earthy smell of evergreen Mediterranean *macchia*.

Then dinner is served on a terrace with widescreen views over the unspoilt Manghisi valley – pasta with red mullet, capers and wild fennel, followed by local lamb and organic vegetables from the garden. +39 327 9064756; dimoradellebalze.com. Doubles from about £355

MARIANEDDI

Barefoot and bikini is the way to go here; no one is going to ask you to dress for supper. This friendly lo-fi agriturismo has direct access to some fabulous secret beaches and is one of only a couple of places to stay inside the Vendicari Nature Reserve. Just off the main Noto-to-Pachino road, Marianeddi is a working farm producing almonds, artichokes, citrus fruits and olive oil. It has six simple, rustic rooms with cool stone floors and sandy

walls, hearty food and a very informal vibe.

In high summer, it's a habitual pistop for post-beach drinks (there are haybales beneath strings of garden lights), and garlicky spaghetti alle vongole or swordfish steaks between the carob trees. But off-season, there's little to disturb the peace. There's no pool for now, but the sea is just a 15-minute walk away. +39 3928877680; marianeddi.info. Doubles from about £90

SAN CARLO SUITES

This charming B&B is in a stellar location in the centre of Noto – not least because it is next door to Caffè Sicilia, which serves some of the best granita in all of Sicily. The owners (a Milanese fashion entrepreneur and a local estate agent) have carefully restored the second floor of a small, late-Baroque townhouse to create six bedrooms with dark volcanic-stone floors, a mix of antiques and contemporary pieces, embroidered bed linens and whip-smart bathrooms with gorgeous reclaimed majolica tiles and mini tubes of Marvis toothpaste. There's a tiny terrace for sunny breakfasts, served by the personable Rosanna who bakes savoury tarts and sweet cakes daily – her pistachio and orange one is sensational. The Baroque glories of Noto are literally on your doorstep. Not to mention that almond granita. +39 0931 836965; sancarlosuites.com. Doubles from about £105

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

CROCIFISSO

Fresh from a recent refurb, Marco Baglieri's justly famous restaurant now has a sleek, modern look – smoky-grey walls, minimal design and moody lighting. Menus, however, are firmly rooted in Baglieri's native Sicily with aubergine arancini, lasagna with bitter broccolotti and spiced local sausage, and the sublime amberjack *alla matalotta*, served on a punchy tomato and black-olive sauce. The weighty wine list has labels from across the globe, but best to go for something local. Knowledgeable sommelier Gianmarco Iannello will know exactly what to suggest. Via Principe Umberto 48. +39 0931 571151; ristorantecrocifisso.it. About £80 for two

ANCHE GLI ANGELI

There's always a buzz about this lively café, restaurant, concept store and events space in the sprawling, brick-vaulted crypt of the 18th-century church of San Carlo. Not only is it a reference point for the goings-on in town, but it is also one of the very few places to eat and drink that stays open year round. Come here for coffee and a sweet ricotta-filled *cannolo* at the bar, a light lunch or cocktails and dinner – burrata ravioli with local truffle shavings and

a plate of grilled red prawns from Mazara, perhaps. Via Arnaldo da Brescia 2. +39 0931 576023; ancheigliangeli.it. About £60 for two

LA CIALOMA

Of all the restaurant tables crowding Marzamemi's pretty central piazza, the ones to head for are tucked away in the far-right-hand corner. La Cialoma is a homely little place (once a tuna fisherman's cottage) with embroidered tablecloths, tiled walls and a flower-filled terrace. Lina Campisi's traditional fish-centric menus are based on what the boats bring in so change regularly, but look out for *tagliolini* with artichokes and shrimp, sizzling deep-fried anchovies and local *moscardini* (baby octopus) stewed with Pachino tomatoes and red wine. Piazza Regina Margherita 23, Marzamemi. +39 0931 841772. About £70 for two

MANNA

Designer Gordon Guillaumier was responsible for the conversion of the former cellars of the historic Palazzo Nicolaci into Manna. The bar, dominated by a neon Saiga Soda sign, leads to four vaulted rooms dressed with furniture by Knoll, Vita and Artemide plus striking artworks. Menus take inspiration from all over

Italy, so you will find Venetian-style *baccalà mantecato* (creamed salt cod) along with local lamb shanks in a Nero d'Avola wine reduction and the chef's chocolatey take on an arancino. The feel is more cool Milan than rustic Sicily, but then parts of Noto feel like they're moving in that direction. Via Rocco Pirri 19. +39 0931 836051; mannanoto.it. About £70 for two

CAFFÈ SICILIA

A breakfast (or any other break) at the celebrated Caffè Sicilia with a granita and sweet brioche is obligatory. Founded in 1892, this delightful pasticceria has just become more famous since Netflix featured the self-effacing Assenza in its *Chef's Table* series. His exquisite granita, ice cream and pastries all proudly showcase local ingredients and producers – almonds from Avola, lemons from Noto and pistachios from Bronte on the slopes of Etna. Corso Vittorio Emanuele 125. +39 0931 835013

GETTING HERE

British Airways (britishairways.com) flies direct from London Gatwick to Catania. Noto is about an hour and a half by car from there.

a courtyard; an artwork in a bathroom; a sitting room; the pool, all at Maison des Oliviers; double-chocolate biscuits at Caffè Sicilia in Noto