

Sicilian Seduction

DH Lawrence loved it fiercely; Truman Capote wrote with passion in its thrall. Taormina is one slice of Sicily that demands – and will get – your full attention.

Words SHARON FEINSTEIN



PERCHED ON A CLIFF TOP, Taormina dominates all around: valleys of almond, olive and cypress trees that sink into the dancing Ionian Sea. On clear days, the view ahead is of Italy's tip, the peninsula of Calabria, and behind, the looming smoky presence of the majestic volcano Etna.

There you stand with a truly momentous feeling between the mountains and above the sea. Africa is only 128km away, and for us the September sun blazed above the beach at the Belmond Villa Sant'Andrea, a hotel with so much charm and beauty you find yourself utterly bewitched.

The hotel sits in its own cove in the Bay of Mazzarò, a rather splendid and secretive world set apart from the tourists who come searching for legendary Taormina. If not for my wandering nature I would gladly spend a year here, having granitas for breakfast, lounging among the elegant gardens in my shorts, surrounded by sweet smells of jasmine and lemons, sipping cocktails on the rose-hued terrace, enjoying fresh fish and seafood barbecues on the beach served by white-jacketed waiters... A life utterly easy and indolent under the spell of the Belmond Villa Sant'Andrea. My friend Diana, sketching the bay, had me swimming in the cobalt sea every morning.

Beneath the arch of Porta Messina you enter this extraordinary town, where each wave of conquerors has left its legacy. Ancient Greeks built the amphitheatre rivalling Rome's Colosseum and captured in Woody Allen's *Mighty Aphrodite*, now the setting for concerts and the annual Taormina Film Festival.

Romans, Spaniards and Normans left their temples, palaces and golden cathedrals, and Arabs their sweet cakes and brightly coloured confectionery. First impressions are exuberant, chaotic, but Taormina also has many quiet corners, serene courtyards, alleyways, hidden villas and inconspicuous trattoria.

Top of my list were Da Nino, La Malvasia and Viccolo Stretto. Nino knows how to cherish every table, and his home-made pappardelle with black truffle and plump red prawns from the bay below is so delicious it's lodged in my dreams. La Malvasia, a nostalgic family restaurant where the charming mama has been cooking for 43 years, served us such



Belmond Grand Hotel Timeo, Villa Sant'Andrea's sister hotel boasts panoramic views to Mount Etna, adjacent to the famous Teatro Greco-Romano and 14th-century Palazzo Corvaja

a delicate and intense plate of Pasta Norma that I was forced to ask for seconds and then, of course, the luscious semifreddo. Viccolo Stretto, off the town's main street, Corso Umberto, sits at the top of the narrowest stone staircase, which becomes difficult later when you've eaten a plate of pasta followed by elegantly flavoured fresh fish. We sat outside overlooking moon-washed spires and the faded red rooftops of medieval Taormina, mysteriously silent and intensely romantic.

I loved the luxury of experiencing two hotels here, because once you've left beachside Villa Sant'Andrea and gone up to the town, its sister Grand Hotel Timeo welcomes you. Richard Gere spent a holiday between the two just weeks before us, and Susan Sarandon and other Hollywood names stay at the Timeo for the film festival.

The dramatic, panoramic view from its terrace, especially in the changing light, left me with that same wonder and sense of peace that I feel standing before a Turner landscape. We couldn't get enough of it, inevitably heading there at sunset to sample delicious Etna wines, and on our last night eating in the restaurant where wonderful Sicilian dishes are rooted in the soil and in tradition.

Strolling through Taormina, sampling another creamy ricotta *cannolo* or buying dazzlingly bright ceramics, we bumped into a wedding party spilling out of the church, Visconti style – a real-life piece of cinema straight from the '50s. There was an array of buxom women in short, shiny, skintight skirts

teetering on stilettos, and men in sharp suits with slicked-back black hair and sideburns, and sunglasses: handsome, mysterious, brimming with Italian vitality.

Looking up, Diana noticed Stars of David carved into the lovely terracotta municipal building, scattered remnants of a once thriving Jewish Quarter, its narrow streets having names like Via del Ghetto and Via Ibrahim. One-hundred-thousand Jews were expelled from Sicily in 1492 and later invited to return. Only a few, however, responded.

After the town's throng, Villa Sant'Andrea's Oliviero restaurant is utterly relaxing, with flickering candles, crisply attired waiters, and soft piano music floating over the water – a glamorous scene befitting an era in which a young Mastroianni might have clinked glasses with Loren. Gracious manager Giovanni Nastasi, who has ruled the hotel for 15 years, is masterful at keeping a keen eye on every detail.

Taormina is special, legendary and mythological in the same way that Venice is like no other place on earth. DH Lawrence called his home in Taormina, the Villa Fontana, 'the greatest find of my life'. Truman Capote later moved into the same rose-coloured house and penned *The Dogs Bark: Public People and Private Places* there. Leaving Taormina, Lawrence wrote, 'Ah, dark, dark garden with your olives and your wine, your medlars and mulberries and many almond trees, your steep terraces ledged high above the sea, I am leaving you, slinking out.' Our departure wasn't quite as poetic, although it was with a real sense of having tasted something extraordinary. □

For more information visit belmond.com and vicolostrettotaormina.it. Sharon Feinstein flew there with Easyjet, which operates flights to Catania, Sicily, from Bristol, Gatwick, Luton and Manchester airports.