

Island LIVING

We go in search of the good life in *Sicily's* historic *Taormina* and discover ruins, cliffs and clear seas

Words **EMMA J PAGE**

There aren't many three wheelers that can instantly evoke the glamour of *la dolce vita*, but it turns out that a classic Italian

Ape Calessino is an exception to the rule. It's a warm, cloudless day and I'm travelling up a steep hillside on the way to the tiny village of Castelmola perched high on the crags above Taormina, overlooking the Ionian Sea on Sicily's east coast. Classic car enthusiast Enzo is next to me, steering the vehicle with its scooter-style handlebars when we make a sudden, unscheduled stop by the roadside. Non-plussed, my eyes follow him as he leans over a low rock wall, fishing a penknife from his pocket. Moments later, he climbs back into the Ape and hands me a freshly plucked fig. 'Mangia, mangia,' he instructs. And as I bite into the ripe fruit, I realize exactly why life on this island remains so intoxicating.

Taormina's annual film festival made this pretty hilltop town the place to see and be seen in the 1950s and 60s. From Truman Capote and Sofia Lauren to Audrey Hepburn and Elizabeth Taylor, there's barely a Hollywood name or Cinecittà legend who hasn't ambled through its gardens, relaxed on a lushly planted terrace with a typical brioche and strawberry granita, or explored its dramatic coastline by fishing boat. But even the big stars who've made the area their home can't outshine the town itself, uniquely positioned 200 metres above sea level, with direct views across to Mount Etna and presided over by an immaculately preserved Greek Theatre.

Long before its *dolce vita* heyday, Taormina's ancient buildings, clustered cheek-by-jowl across the hills, wowed early 19th century travellers on their Grand Tour of Europe, seduced by the town's Palazzo Corvaja, with its Moorish origins and endless bougainvillea-clad alleyways. A steady stream of visitors has been flowing to the







●● THERE'S VERY MUCH *an island* ATMOSPHERE ●●

area ever since, many staying at the town's oldest bolthole, The Belmond Grand Hotel Timeo with its sweeping views of the coast and fiery Mount Etna in its eyeline.

Now the luxury hotel has expanded along the hillside and lost none of its original charm, with a vast, comfortable terrace, said to be the spot where DH Lawrence worked on *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Meanwhile, an ancient passageway connecting the building to the adjacent Greek Theatre still provides discreet access to the open-air stage for names including Sting and the stars of the Russian Moiseyev Ballet during the town's annual festival.

There's plenty to explore in the area, from the lava-clad slopes of nearby Mount Etna, from which there are regular, largely harmless eruptions, forming part of daily Sicilian life, to small surrounding villages including Forza D'Agrò and the old shepherd's sanctuary of Madonna della Rocca. And it's not difficult to evoke a sense of retro glamour if you choose to unearth these treasures in a vintage car such as Enzo's Ape, or a



classic Fiat 500. Otherwise, head to the Timeo's sister residence, Belmond Villa Sant'Andrea, if you want to retreat to its private gardens and relax on its stretch of shingle beach. Fortunately, the warm bath-like waters of the Ionian Sea and the sight of tiny Isola Bella, a small nature reserve marooned just off the coast, more than make up for any temporary discomfort underfoot. Both hotels allow their guests to share facilities, with a regular shuttle, or cable car, zipping between the two.

Though mainland Italy is only a few kilometres from this part of Sicily, there's very much an island atmosphere here, largely due to its self-sufficiency. Mount Etna is as generous as she is temperamental: her surrounding fertile land produces abundant bounty, from the

oranges and lemons that Sicily is famous for, to almonds, olives, honey, prickly pears, aubergines, artichokes, capers and pistachios. And Planeta, the island's famed winemaker, has opened a sixth vineyard right on the mountain's slopes, producing award-winning reds, whites and roses, all from its mineral-rich soil. The day I visited for an informal tour, I joined the family, including celebrated wine connoisseur and chef Diego Planeta, for a hearty lunch of busiati con erbe spontanee (homemade pasta with wild greens) sitting at a sun-dappled trestle table in the shadow of a vast olive tree. You'll soon discover that Sicilians are immensely hospitable people.

The world's cinematic gaze may have shifted elsewhere but the town remains as intriguing as ever. Wander through its lush public gardens, planted by English



aristocrat Florence Trevelyan at the turn of the last century, pause for a drink at the Shaker bar, favourite haunt of Tennessee Williams, or drift through the Bay of the Sirens on a rainbow boat. I quickly discovered that it's not at all difficult to conjure up your very own slice of la dolce vita here. ♦

► *Emma travelled as a guest of Kirker Holidays. A four-night stay combining two nights at Belmond Grand Hotel Timeo and two nights at Belmond Villa Sant'Andrea is priced from £998pp (two sharing). It includes return flights from London to Catania, return private car transfers, accommodation with breakfast, and the services of the Kirker Concierge. Kirker Holidays, 020 7593 2283; kirkerholidays.com*