

# TRAVEL

## EUROPE

### I'm not just Italian, I'm Sicilian; it's different, and I traveled to Sicily to understand how



One of the three most complete temples in the Valley of Temples, built in the 5th century B.C. Photos by Paris Wolfe, cleveland.com

Spending two weeks soaking up the culture and chasing the ghosts of great-grandparents.

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SICILY, Italy — Sometimes I engage in a bit of indulgent self-reflection to better understand what makes me, me. I want to know who influenced my beliefs, values and traditions.

That personal anthropology previously led me to genealogy research. More recently, it has fueled my travel decisions. In October, I chose Sicily, an island that sits at the tip of the boot and is about the size of Massachusetts — an island that's been part of Italy, technically, for less than 200 years.

I had Sicily on my travel radar long before the second season of HBO's "The White Lotus" was aired. The show is set in



Sicily is full of mountainous terrain.

Taormina, Sicily, and has made the island a popular destination for 2023. I'm glad I beat the rush.

I spent two weeks traipsing the western third of the Mediterranean isle chasing the ghosts of my great-grandparents, Antonio and Rosa Marie Ciranni. Both were born in Sicily in 1872. They left for the United States in the early 1900s in search of jobs and a better life for their children. In 1908,

other cultural clues that make the Sicilians different from mainland Italians. I found that in food, architecture and multicultural roots.

For my sojourn I was lucky to stay with a friend in her grandparents' hometown of Terrasini. Just 19 miles west of Palermo, the small seaside city doesn't suffer from the afflictions of tourism, is quite affordable, walkable and charming. It was an ideal headquarters for exploring the region.

While I'd recommend a car for maximum mobility, I also advise excellent driving skills and nerves of steel. Sicilians drive like it's a competitive sport and motorcycles pass on the shoulder or lane split in busy traffic.

I'd also suggest working with an in-country travel professional to get the most from your time and money. I worked with *Ciro (cheer-o) Grillo*, a Sicilian tour designer who grew up in Palermo and worked for the Sicilian travel department for decades. He now operates *Sicily Routes* and custom designs tours for a negotiated consulting fee based on length of time, number of travelers, and what you hope to accomplish. Either he or a multilingual guide are available to host those tours.

Grillo designed a personal tour for the first four days of my trip and hit my main goals — learn about family and food while dabbling in history and culture. He offered insight, translation and in-the-moment adventure. One of my serendipitous moments came when we walked past an olive-pressing operation. Noting my interest

**SEE EUROPE, K2**

## SICILY

### Chasing documents to prove my bloodline and gain

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TERRASINI, Sicily — Three generations of Di Grasso men visit Sicily in search of their roots in the second season of HBO's smash hit, "The White Lotus." The patriarch, Albert, played by F. Murray Abraham, expects a heart-warming welcome from long-lost cousins. Instead, he is chased by an angry, wrinkled woman who threatens to throw an artichoke at his head.

I can relate to Albert's desire to embrace his Sicilian heritage. And, perhaps, to the need for a heart-warming connection. Who doesn't want to be rooted deeply in family history? Why else would genealogy be a top hobby?

In October, I went to Sicily to stalk the history (and vital documents) of my

great-grandparents Antonio and Rosa Maria Ciranni. Unlike Albert in "The White Lotus," my dreams were met with mixed results. I found no Cirannis in my great-grandparents' hometown of Grotte (population 5,000), so no one welcomed me. On the other hand, no one threatened to throw artichokes at me either.

My net gain was gathering the genealogical records I sought.

I hadn't expected a reunion. Still, I came away wanting more than just my grandfather's birth and marriage certificates.

My document-gathering goals were purposeful. By proving my direct bloodline to Italy, I am eligible for dual citizenship. I thought I'd have to give up my U.S. citizenship, learn a new language and take a difficult test — among other imagined hurdles — to become a citizen of a European Union

Rosa Marie gave birth to my maternal grandfather in a Pennsylvania coal-mining town.

While I spent a day in the young Cirannis' quiet hometown of Grotte (population 5,000), I also visited cities and attractions from the capital of Palermo on the northern coast to the ancient Greek temples in Agrigento on the southwestern coast. I was searching for local food traditions and



The author examines an 1872 census record in Grotte, Sicily, Italy. Jennifer Sontag

country. That's not so of Italy.

The Italian government offers citizenship to anyone who can legitimately prove their Italian bloodline. Unlike the United States, where you get citizenship for being born in the country, known as *jure soli*, Italian citizenship follows the bloodline, known as *jure sanguinis*. My great-grandparents were both born in Sicily in 1872 and immigrated in the early 1900s. Neither became U.S. citizens before their U.S. children — my grandfather included — were born. Thus, I qualify.

But, for my citizenship quest, I need thorough proof of bloodline through vital records. The fantasy of becoming an Italian citizen — with the freedom to live in any of the 27 EU countries or make extended visits — is powerful.

**SEE SICILY, K4**

## EUROPE

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The Tyrrhenian Sea offers beautiful views. Photos by Paris Wolfe, cleveland.com

## Continues from K1

Est, Grillo talked to the operators and soon I was touring the small operation and buying oil that had been pressed just minutes earlier.

I met Grillo through a friend who lives in Sicily. Grillo says 90% of his clients are Americans looking for family connections to the island and its people. He even links them with Italian genealogists if they're interested. In typical Italian style, he negotiates his fees based on each project.

We started in Palermo. The largest city in Sicily (population 676,000) and the fifth most populated in Italy, Palermo is not the shoot-em-up city of mafia movies. It's a large, sometimes gritty, 2,700-year-old port city with multicultural influences on its history, culture, architecture and gastronomy.

To show my sophistication, I should consider the most fascinating sites to be the Teatro Massimo Vittorio Emanuele opera house or the I Quattro Canti (Four Corners, or historic town square, built in 1608-1620) or the sprawling Palermo Cathedral (1185 and beyond).

Instead, I was drawn to the vibrant chaos of the marketplaces. The central city has marketplaces in the four historic quarters, places where tables of goods snake through residential alleyways. Open-air vendors hawk tropical fruit, local vegetables, fresh seafood, dried legumes, bakery, candy, household goods, clothing, tablecloths and fabric, street food, cocktails and so much more.

If the crush of pedestrians passing through a busy market alley isn't enough, the crowd must part for the occasional motorcycle buzzing through. The best part of the marketplace is the street food. Sometimes it's good to NOT know what you're eating before you try it ... otherwise you'd miss a great experience.

Grillo silently presented me with plate of what I recognized as messy, greasy, seasoned and grilled calamari, a sliced roast beef sandwich and fried panelle. While still warm, the calamari rings were juicy, slightly chewy and delicious. After a few forkfuls I learned the rings were really stigghiola or grilled lamb/goat intestines wrapped around spring onions. The knowledge didn't deter me. They were savory. The "roast beef slices" were cooked spleen. While tasty, the chewy texture kind of freaked me out. The panelle, chickpea fritters, were a repeat order throughout the trip.

My big revelation in Palermo – something relevant to a native Clevelander – was that a Sicilian cassata cake is nothing like Cleveland cassata cake. The Sicilian cake is sponge cake moistened with fruit juices or liqueur, layered with ricotta cheese and candied fruit or chocolate bits. It has a marzipan shell and candied fruit on top. This version was created



Terrasini, just 19 miles from Palermo, in northwestern Sicily makes a great headquarters for traveling the western side of the island.



It's better to not know what you're trying. The spleen sandwich was better than expected.

between the 9th and 11th centuries and has Arabic influences. A Cleveland cassata cake, on the other hand, is sponge cake layered with strawberries and custard, frosted with whipped cream.

While the big city of Palermo is active throughout the day, I found that smaller towns shut down at midday for riposo, the Italian equivalent of a siesta. I couldn't buy food, gelato, bakery, souvenirs, clothing, wine — anything — during that time. It was even challenging to buy a caffeine source like espresso or Coke Zero in the afternoon. (P.S. I didn't see a Pepsi anywhere.)

Because I worked with Grillo I had a powerfully packed Sicilian experience. He took me to one of the most impressive historical sites in western Sicily, the Valle dei Templi or "Valley of the Temples" in



True Sicilian cassata cake is much different from Cleveland cassata cake.

Agrigento.

It takes more than two hours to travel the 82 miles of switchback mountain roads across the island from Palermo to Agrigento. En route we stopped halfway in Lercara Friddi to see where Frank Sinatra's parents were born. And, again in Grotte to find my family's Sicilian roots.

The Valley of the Temples is a sprawling park with remains of seven Greek temples from the 5th century B.C.; they were built in the same century as the Parthenon in Greece. We visited the three most complete, the temples of Juno, Concordia and Heracles. Not only are these archeologically significant, but they are an early touchpoint of the various peoples who have built and influenced Sicilian culture and contributed their DNA to the genetic diaspora.

While Grillo chose obvious must-see

destinations for my interests, including Palermo's markets and the Valley of the Temples, he also took me to "hidden" restaurants for traditional, not tourist, food. At one I was food-shamed for ordering cappuccino in the afternoon. After reacting in mock horror, the waiter told me — Grillo translated — that milk in the coffee after 11 a.m. would interfere with digestion. I had a good laugh at my mistake and drank an espresso instead. And I had no trouble digesting the garlicky pasta and the beefy braciolo.

Years in the tourism industry means Grillo seems to know everywhere and everyone. His connections give him access to experiences that are hard to find. He set me up with a private winery tour and a cooking class in a private home, both south of Agrigento in the coastal town of Licata.

Alfredo Quignones hosted us at Quignones Casa Vinicola, a winery in Licata. There he has 100 hectares (almost 250 acres) of grapes including natives like Nero d'Avola (red) and Ansonia (white) and vinifera Chardonnay, Petit Verdot and Cabernet Franc. During the sampling, each wine was paired with a fresh dish. The romance of a Sicilian vineyard and good winemaking made for a memorable experience.

Quignones also grows olives, almonds and citrus. He offered olive oils and flavored olive oils for tasting. Then, as a bonus, he took me hiking through the olive grove to see the harvest. I needed the walk after all the wine and food.

Exploring my roots included learning more about food. Restaurants are like looking in the window at the culture. A cooking class let me live the culture, if only for an afternoon. To do that Grillo left me at the home of Enza Mule and her sister, Lena. Neither spoke English.

The language barrier gave me a moment of panic, but with the help of Google translate we were soon "talking," gesturing and laughing. By the time the night ended, we were hugging like cousins.

Under Enza's tutelage, I learned to hand-peel tomatoes by gently bruising them first and to use squash vines and leaves in vegetable dishes.

My favorite dish of the day was the traditional spiedini, thin sheets of beef rolled around a filling of breadcrumbs, cheese, onions, raisins and pinenuts. These rolls are then stacked, skewered and roasted. I'm Sicilian, why didn't I know about this?

After preparing a five-course dinner and setting a table with linens, we were rejoined by Grillo. And the sisters generously shared a friend's homemade wine.

The trip was far from over, but my goals had been met. I found another piece of me. I saw where my Sicilian family originated, saw their countryside and experienced their food.