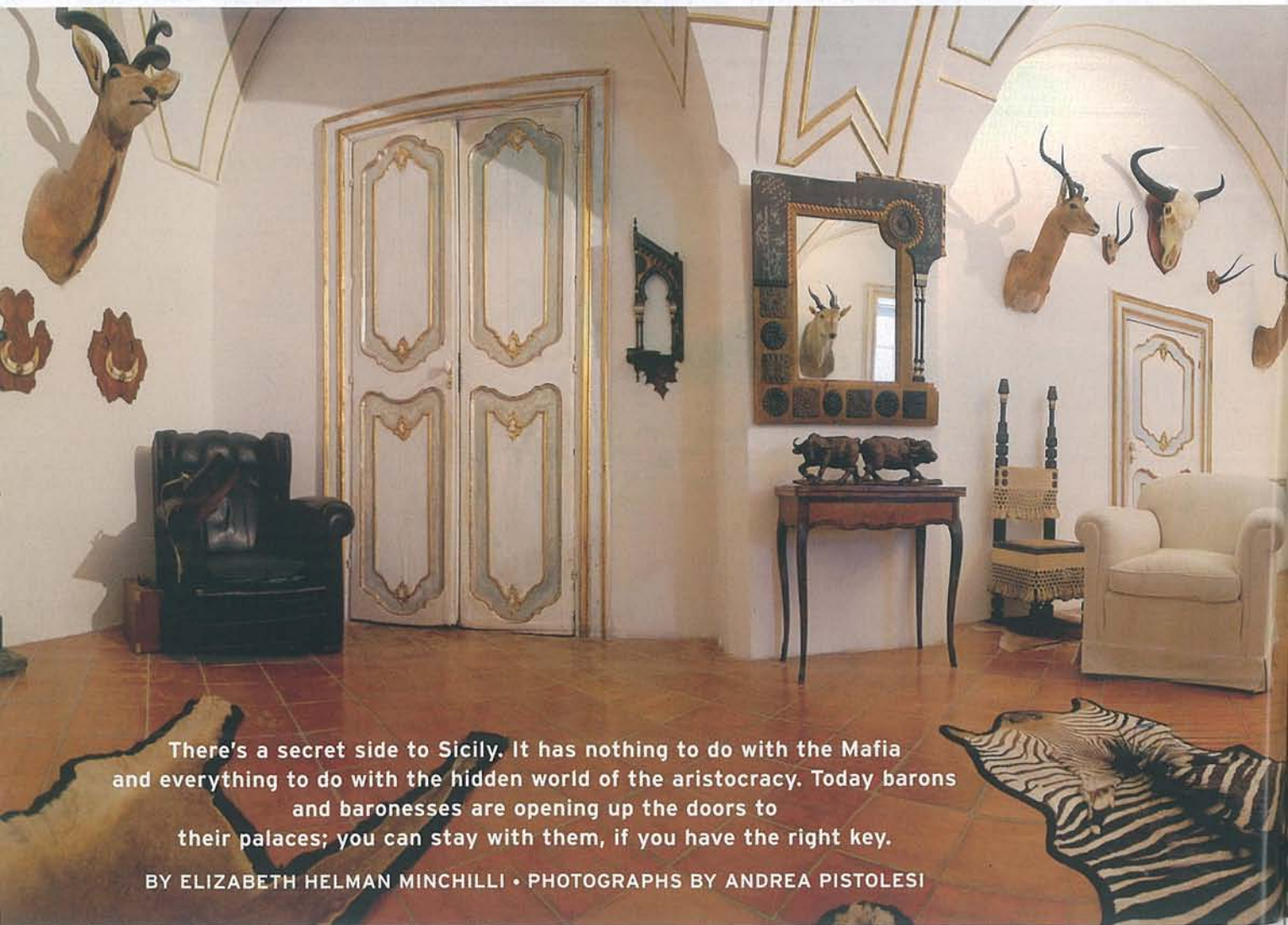


# SICILY'S SECRET



There's a secret side to Sicily. It has nothing to do with the Mafia and everything to do with the hidden world of the aristocracy. Today barons and baronesses are opening up the doors to their palaces; you can stay with them, if you have the right key.

BY ELIZABETH HELMAN MINCHILLI • PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANDREA PISTOLESI



# RET PALACES



Sicily, the largest island in the Mediterranean, has bustling port cities, like Trapani in the northwest (top). Sicily also has amazing baroque palaces. Baron Beneventano del Bosco's palace in Syracuse is open for tours by appointment for guests who stay overnight at his country manor, Case del Feudo.

**MY MEMORIES OF SICILY WERE NOT AUSPICIOUS.** Rain, cold hotels, and more rain. These are some of the snapshots I carry in my head of our family vacation to Sicily during the winter of 1972. OK, I was a testy teen. But it was also the worst storm the island had seen in 30 years, so I can't be blamed if it took me another 32 years to finally make it back there. But the rain must have stopped at some point during that summer because, in addition to those wet memories, I also carry some of the most thrilling and dramatic images of my childhood. Like my sisters and I perched atop a

blindingly white marble column, fallen over from a Greek temple, the sun bouncing off not only the ancient stone, but also the bluest sea I had ever seen.

I realized I had given Sicily short shrift, and since I live in Rome, many of my friends were shocked that I had never made it back there. Yet when I started asking around, I found I wasn't alone. Although everyone talks a good Sicily, few seem to make it there—Italians as well as foreigners.

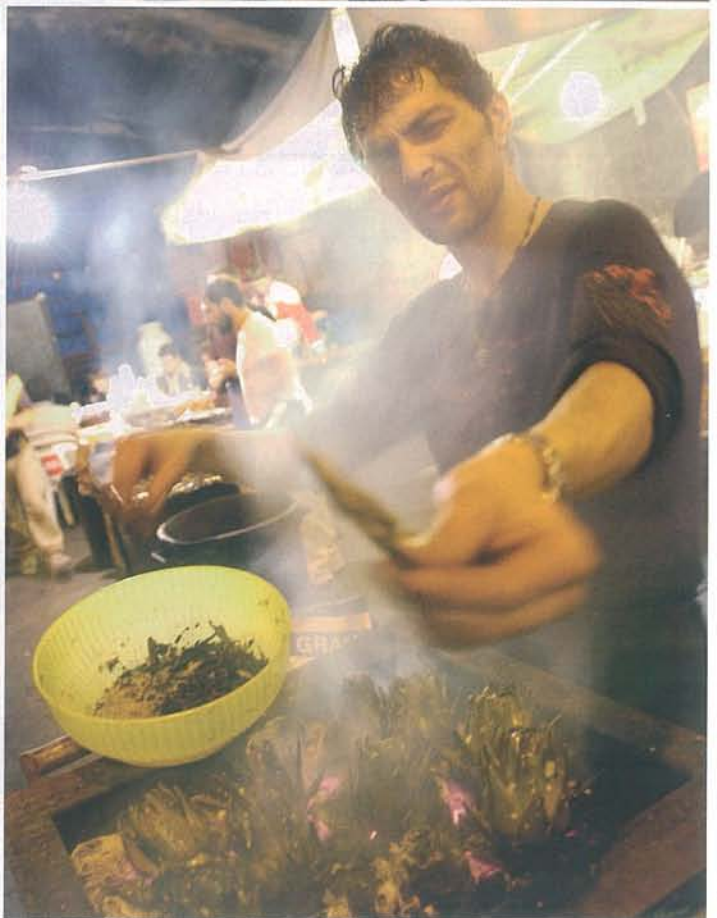
There are a couple reasons for this. For most of the last century, Sicily was better known as the epicenter of the Mafia. Also, the south of Italy suffered economically after World War II, and many Sicilians left their homes to look for work in the north. But today Sicily seems to be slowly opening up to visitors, many drawn by sights such as the archaeological ruins of Syracuse and the volcano of Mount Etna.

In addition to these well-known landmarks, there is “another side to Sicily,” explains my friend Stefano Aluffi. “If you have the right key,



Sicily's food scene is a serious one and the products of Catania are proudly displayed at the fish market (one of Italy's finest) and in the window of a pâtissier who has elaborately crafted fruits from marzipan.





## As in the grand tour of the 18th century, I arrived in Sicily with “letters of introduction.”

Sicilians will open their doors to you with a level of hospitality that is truly extraordinary.” Aluffi should know since his agency, *A Private View of Italy*, is one way to gain access to private palaces and villas in Sicily.

In the past ten years, Italian counts and countesses have realized that by accepting paying guests they can finance a much-needed new roof or fix leaking plumbing. In Sicily, this idea is catching on. For as little as \$1,000 per week, visitors can stay at a baron or a marchesa’s estate.

I WAS UNPREPARED FOR THE SHEER physicality of Sicily. As the plane crossed over the north coast I realized what now seems obvious: the overwhelming presence of the sea. And as much as I had read, it still took me a good two minutes to realize that the enormous bulk looming ahead was the smoking volcano of Mount Etna.

As in a grand tour of the 18th century, I arrived in Sicily with “letters of introduction.” Although, rather than ink to parchment, these were e-mails sent ahead by Aluffi. They seemed to do the trick.

First on the agenda was a visit to the Baron Beneventano del Bosco, who promised to show me his palace in Syracuse and then put me up for the night at his estate outside of town.

After landing in Catania, my friend

Laura and I drove toward Syracuse, about 30 miles to the south. Like many Italian cities, the suburbs of Syracuse are new, badly planned, and unsightly. We ignored this, and headed to the old center of town, Ortygia, located on a spit of land jutting out into the sea.

Although Syracuse was a power in ancient times, and its Greek and Roman ruins are some of the most exciting in Sicily, Ortygia’s unique beauty was defined by another event, the earthquake that devastated this corner of Sicily in 1693. Although many of its ancient monuments were flattened, the city rebuilt in a unified style known as Sicilian Baroque.

Just as we made our way over the spit of land that connects Ortygia to the mainland, a policewoman stopped us: “No traffic zone,” she warned.

“But we are going to see the *barone*,” I said.

“Oh! Go right ahead,” she replied. Evidently there is only one baron in town, and just the whisper of his name had us driving across one of the most beautiful baroque piazzas in Italy. The Piazza del Duomo is located on the

highest point of Ortygia, and its wide open space is made all the more dramatic because of the narrow, winding alleys leading up to it. This is where the acropolis of the ancient Greek city once stood; today it is defined by the baroque palaces that ring the sun-



drenched, white stone square.

The Duomo, with its massive facade, dominates one end of the square. And of all the private palaces on the piazza, none is more impressive than Palazzo Beneventano del Bosco, where we were due to meet the baron. But barons have obligations: Although we had arrived on time for our appointment, the baron was held up at a meeting of the Knights of Malta.

We used our free time to visit the

There are many secrets to Sicily (at left, clockwise) such as aristocratic dwellings like Palazzo Ganugi in Palermo, owned by Princess Carine. In Catania, the second largest city on the island, the old meets the new: Here, you can find a candlestick maker, taste fresh roasted artichokes, or buzz the busy city on a Vespa. On Scopello (above), about 40 miles from Palermo, stands an abandoned tonnara, a building where tuna was processed after it came in off the fishing boats.





The palazzos and villas of Sicily have typically been a secret world, tucked away from the gazing eye of the tourist. Nowadays, however, the aristocrats are opening their doors and, in some cases, fluffing up pillows. Palazzo Gangi in Palermo (above) holds dinners, cocktail receptions, and teas for a limited group of people. Overnighters may want to book ahead at Villa Tasca (center), just outside of Palermo, or at Palazzo Biscari in Catania (bottom).





## Villa Don Arcangelo all'Olmo is located amid acres of orange groves, with the sea on one side and Mount Etna on the other.

town. For most people, this would mean going to the justifiably famous archaeological park in the outskirts of Syracuse. Instead, we wandered the historic center, where alleyways off the main square took us to fancifully encrusted palaces—many of which seemed to be abandoned. Eventually every road led us to water, since Ortygia is an island, connected to Syracuse by bridges. We walked along the promenade and looked across the tranquil harbor toward the coast of the ancient settlement of Plemmyrion.

Hunger sent us to La Foglia. The sign proclaimed it a restaurant, yet when we entered we thought we had mistakenly wandered into a private house. Tables and couches were scattered through the rooms, each place set with different china, each table sporting a different tablecloth.

"I tried to make it seem like a private home," explained Beppe Pravato

as he seated us. "I wanted this to be a place where people would linger—as much for the ambience and company as for the food." Many dishes, such as soup made from pureed fava beans, reflect the vegetarian leanings of the owner. Others, like mussels wrapped in lemon leaves, are a local specialty.

As the lengthy lunch finished, we assured Beppe that we would like to linger, chatting and listening to music, but that we had an appointment with "Il Barone." Both Beppe and his daughter chuckled, "Yes, I know the *Barone*...I used to work with him," was all he said. There was obviously much he wasn't saying, and this was to set the tone for our trip. Everyone we met—from one end of Sicily to the other—seemed to know everyone else. And the relationships were complicated, colorful, and always a bit of a mystery. "Give the *Barone* my greetings!"

WITH WORDS LIKE "BARONE" AND "Knights of Malta" in my head, I did not quite know what I was expecting of this Syracuse baron. A velvet cape? A horse and carriage? Certainly not the dapper man in his mid 60s, who could have been a banker in London.

Baron Beneventano del Bosco, fluent in English, greeted us at the entrance and kissed our hands. "Our family history is a long one," he said as he began the tour of his home, first built as a hospice for the Knights of Malta in the 16th century. "We have been making wine since 1710, and this is something we still take very seriously," the baron explained as he showed us the newest addition, the *enoteca* (wine bar) that opens onto the main piazza and is open to the public.

The baron explained Sicilian titles are landed titles, based on feudal holdings. Baron del (*continued on page 103*)

### The Keys to Sicily

**UNLOCK THE GILDED DOOR** A Private View of Italy arranges tours to palaces. Tour rates for two to three people start at about 1,500 euros per day, which includes a full day of touring led by an art historian in a private car, 011-39-06-474-1985. Wimco has a portfolio of luxury villas in Sicily, including Villa Tasca in Palermo, which rents for 18,750 euros per week, 800-449-1553, [www.wimco.com](http://www.wimco.com).

**BUNK WITH A BARON** Baron del Bosco's Case del Feudo has 12 rooms, with nightly rates starting at 124 euros. Guests of Case del Feudo can prearrange a tour of the baron's Syracuse palazzo. La Foresteria di Palazzo Biscari is two apartments attached to the palace. Nightly rates for a double start at 80 euros, 011-39-09-532-1818, [www.palazzobiscari.com](http://www.palazzobiscari.com). Villa Don Arcangelo all'Olmo in Carruba is really two villas owned by a marchesa and marchese. Rates range from \$1,000 to \$25,000 per week and can be booked with Think Sicily. The 12th-century Palazzo Federico in Palermo has three rooms. Rates start at 330 euros per night. This is also through Think Sicily, 011-44-020-7377-8518, [www.thinksicily.com](http://www.thinksicily.com).

**GET THERE** From Rome, fly to Palermo or Catania on Alitalia. From Catania, it's about an hour drive to Syracuse.





This bride was definitely made to feel like a princess for the day. She celebrated her wedding at Palazzo Biscari, a palace that took more than a century to build.