

TRAVEL

16

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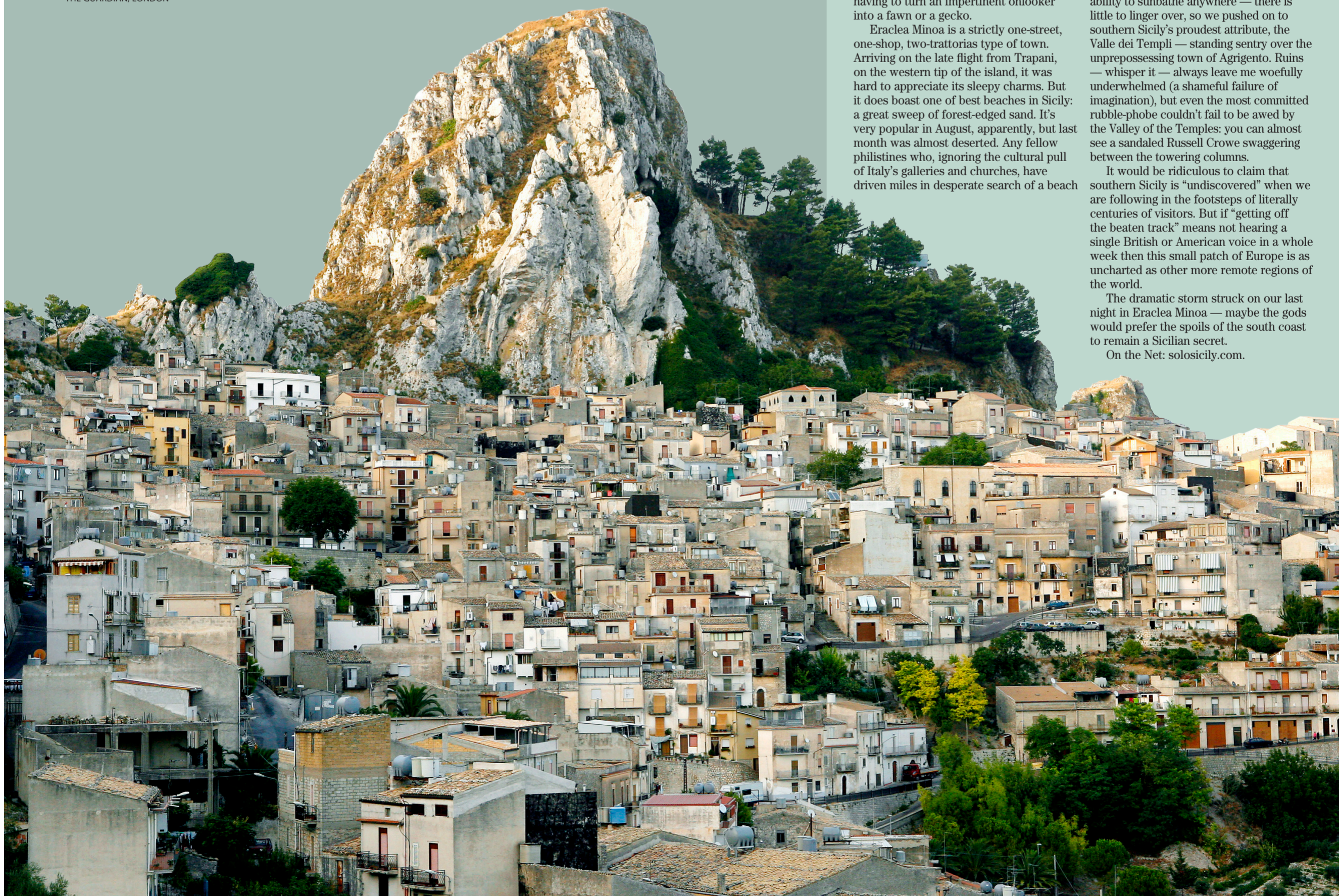
Below: Evening falls on the village of Caltabellotta, Sicily.

PHOTO: BLOOMBERG

Sicily's secret south

The island's untamed southern coast may not be as pretty as its more famous beaches, but it has plenty to recommend it — not least a lack of tourists

BY LISA ALLARDICE
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“Excuse me,” says Gioacchino Sortino — who looks every sharp-suited inch the Sicilian businessman — reaching for his cellphone. “It’s my mama, she worries about me.” And Gioacchino is worried about us. Wild, beautiful, unpredictable — and a little bit scary, Sicily has lived up to its tempestuous reputation by staging the most spectacular electrical storm. During the night, our villa — a glass hymn to modernism — felt as insubstantial as one of those plastic snow-storm domes as the elements raged about us. It’s not hard to see why the ancient Greeks chose to settle in Sicily on this imposing cliff top facing Africa — or to imagine what portents they might have read into the furious display from the gods above. This morning, though, all — with the exception of Gioacchino’s mama — is calm, the horizon as straight as the crease in his trousers.

Gioacchino used to work as a sommelier at Gordon Ramsay at Claridge’s in London, but came home to set up SoloSicily — with his brother, naturally — to prove to visitors that there’s more to his country than the Mafia. Compared with the manicured elegance of its most popular destinations, fashionable Taormina or charming Cefalu, southern Sicily is still undoubtedly the scruffy relation. It might not be as conventionally pretty as its neighbors, but the south coast has its own rugged beauty and plenty to recommend it that still seem to be something of an inside secret, remaining largely untouched by the tourist explosion that followed the arrival of cheap flights to Palermo and Catania around a decade ago.

Casa d’Eraclea perches on the edge of Europe, its magnificent infinity pool dropping, apparently seamlessly, into the Mediterranean below. A modern architect-designed house, everything is clean lines, light and glass. Pool and sea dominate. It is like waking up to find oneself in the bright, deliquescent world of a David Hockney LA painting. Even the cactus-studded, hammock-slung garden is all symmetry and pleasing shapes. Its surroundings may be a little rough around the edges, but Casa d’Eraclea most certainly is not.

If it sounds a little un-Sicilian, this is in keeping: it is here that the influences of centuries of occupation — Greek, Roman, Arab, Spanish — are most strongly felt. Looking loftily down on the tiny town of Eraclea Minoa, named after the Cretan king, Minos, Casa d’Eraclea commands a view that would have pleased any conquering monarch, yet you could lounge around naked as a Greek goddess all day if you so desired without any danger of having to turn an impertinent onlooker into a fawn or a gecko.

Eraclea Minoa is a strictly one-street, one-shop, two-trattorias type of town. Arriving on the late flight from Trapani, on the western tip of the island, it was hard to appreciate its sleepy charms. But it does boast one of the best beaches in Sicily: a great sweep of forest-edged sand. It’s very popular in August, apparently, but last month was almost deserted. Any fellow philistines who, ignoring the cultural pull of Italy’s galleries and churches, have driven miles in desperate search of a beach

— not a lido, as the Italians, tellingly, like to call it, but a scrap of sand unpolluted by rows of expensive sun-loungers adorned with beautiful-limbed Italians — will know what a rare and joyous find this is. And it’s only a 10-minute, pine-scented walk from the villa. Here, you could enjoy the sort of bucket-and-spade holiday I always thought was too unchic for Italians.

Eating options are limited — there’s the Sabbia D’Oro or the Lido Garibaldi, serving, well, pizza or pasta, which might seem so-so to your homegrown Sicilian, but seemed pretty damn good to us. Sabbia D’Oro was the livelier and looked as if it did a brisk trade at the height of summer. You could bring young children without worrying, or have a romantic (in an unscrubbed-up sort of way) supper for two looking out at the sea.

The hilltop village of Caltabellotta and its nearby caves are absolutely worth a visit — true Godfather territory. Climbing up to the remains of the medieval Norman castle provides views not only down on to the tangle of cobbled lanes of Caltabellotta but 21 other villages, apparently (we couldn’t count that many). After an espresso in the square, we headed to the fishing port of Sciacca and spent a happy afternoon wandering its picturesquely dilapidated streets. Here, groups of old men topple over pasta bellies in raucous rounds of *boules* or sit silently in the shade intent on their cards; good-looking young men share gelatos in the sunshine; women of all ages and sizes gossip in doorways. (It’s impossible to resist the cliché of the Mediterranean lifestyle — when I’m an old lady, please God, let me be a Sicilian one.)

Continuing further west through untidy seaside resorts stuck barnacle-like on the coast, we ended up in the tiny fishing village of Porto Palo. Nestled unassumingly at the end of the road is the restaurant Da Vittoria. When I sit down to supper in unsunny Britain it warms my soul to know that overlooking a stretch of forgotten beach somewhere on the tip of Europe, tables of noisy Sicilians are tucking into great plates of pasta and sea creatures so fresh they think they’re still in the sea.

Heading east from Eraclea Minoa are the region’s most impressive attractions — including ancient ruins to rival some of the best-preserved in Europe. But, with its modern towns and brutal industrial sites, there’s no pretending this is an attractive stretch of coastline. First up are the Turkish steps, which presumably take their name from their resemblance to Pamukkale in Turkey — a ghostly series of white ridges shimmering in the cliff face. Once you have sat on this strange, almost lunar-ish stairway — and marveled at the Italian ability to sunbathe anywhere — there is little to linger over, so we pushed on to southern Sicily’s proudest attribute, the Valle dei Templi — standing sentry over the unprepossessing town of Agrigento. Ruins — whisper it — always leave me woefully underwhelmed (a shameful failure of imagination), but even the most committed rubble-phobe couldn’t fail to be awed by the Valley of the Temples: you can almost see a sandaled Russell Crowe swaggering between the towering columns.

It would be ridiculous to claim that southern Sicily is “undiscovered” when we are following in the footsteps of literally centuries of visitors. But if “getting off the beaten track” means not hearing a single British or American voice in a whole week then this small patch of Europe is as uncharted as other more remote regions of the world.

The dramatic storm struck on our last night in Eraclea Minoa — maybe the gods would prefer the spoils of the south coast to remain a Sicilian secret.

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