

NEW YORK  
TIMES  
SUNDAY  
APRIL  
28, 2013

## Seeking the less celebrated spots in a town known for its high-profile glamour.

By INGRID K. WILLIAMS

We spotted her simultaneously. But it was my friend Jessie who bounded down the street after the young Sicilian woman whom we had just seen pull a golden arancino from a white paper bag.

"Scusa!" she called after the woman, before catching up to her and inquiring about the still-steaming deep-fried sphere with a creamy rice interior. With a knowing smile, the woman led us to a nearby alley steps from the main drag of Taormina and pointed to a humble pizzeria, the source of the arancini that I've been dreaming about ever since.

Situated about 30 miles north of Catania on the eastern coast of Sicily, Taormina is a gorgeous seaside town perched on a hilltop. It has everything a traveler in search of a storybook Mediterranean escape could hope for: a medieval layout; ancient ruins; belle époque villas; and sweeping views of the Ionian Sea, the Sicilian coastline and, on clear days, the smoky crest of Mount Etna (about 20 miles away as the crow flies). The town has long attracted literary titans, including D. H. Lawrence and Goethe, who once compared Taormina to paradise, and generations of glamorous celebrities, from Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton to Cary Grant, Audrey Hepburn and Sophia Loren.

These days, Taormina, with its designer-label shops and Michelin-starred restaurants, still draws glamour-seeking vacationers. But it is by no means exclusive: for one thing, cruise ships, many filled with Teva-shod budget travelers, loiter in Taormina's bay.

But as I would discover, the real charm of Taormina is not found in the lovely views or the historic sites, nor is it in the luxurious hotels or the stylish bars with dazzling panoramas. Beneath all the glitz lies the true appeal of Taormina: the secret hideaways and discreet spots that have somehow remained under the radar, like the hole-in-the-wall pizzeria from which those heavenly arancini came.

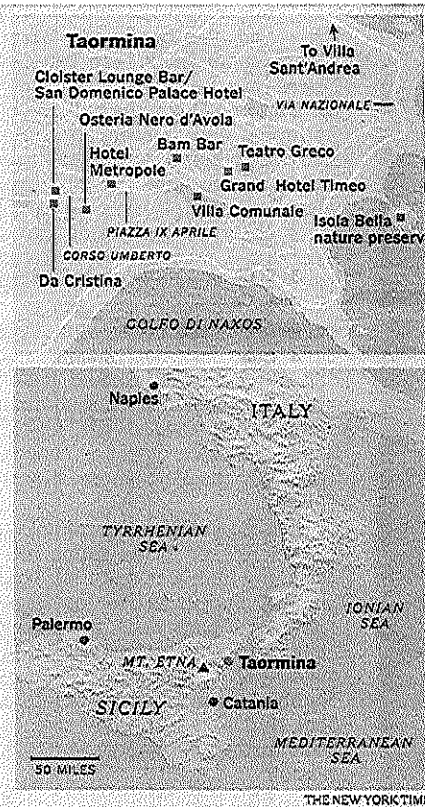
However, when Jessie and I arrived in Taormina on a sunny afternoon in October, I had my doubts about the place. An enormous cruise ship was anchored in the bay, and the main streets were sagging with tourists. To reach our hotel, Jessie had to navigate our rented cherry-red Citroën down a street so crowded that we initially mistook it for a pedestrian zone.

"The whole world comes to Taormina — Russians, Germans, even Filipinos," said Carmelina, a longtime resident who, the afternoon that we arrived, chatted with us at the jewelry shop Il Quadrifoglio, on the bustling Corso Umberto.

Indeed, while walking through the Teatro Greco, an approximately 2,000-year-old Greco-Roman amphitheater that is Taormina's most famous attraction, I spotted Japanese and Swedish tourists. On the expansive terrace of the Grand Hotel Timeo, known for its Etna views and celebrity clientele, I overheard conversations tinged with accents both British and American. And later, as street musicians serenaded the crowd on the main Piazza IX Aprile, I watched a German couple snapping photos of the pretty panorama: a stone clock tower, a pair of picturesque churches and the beautiful view of the bay.

But beyond this handful of tourist magnets, the crowds evaporated.

At the sprawling public gardens known as Villa Comunale, steps from the terrace of the Grand Hotel Timeo, I discovered the



From top, the Greco-Roman amphitheater, a major draw for tourists; sunset in Piazza IX Aprile, the central square; Cristina, of Da Cristina, the best takeout restaurant for unforgettable arancini, serves customers.

same wonderful bay views but shared them with strolling Italian families, not international tour groups. And in those gardens, surrounded by blooming rosebushes and bougainvillea, I had my choice of benches upon which to linger without the onus of shelling out for an overpriced cocktail.

As the sun set, the cruise ship slipped away, leaving a comparatively quiet town behind for Jessie and me to explore. But after a weeklong journey through Sicily with a mercurial GPS misguiding us across the unfamiliar island, we both needed an aperitivo first. Which is how we found ourselves at the Cloister Lounge Bar at the San Domenico Palace Hotel, an elegant establishment in a former 15th-century monastery. Though hardly hidden, the hotel's cloister, shaded by palms and bougainvillea, felt like a secret garden. Last summer, this sublime sanctuary was the stage upon



which Dolce & Gabbana presented its Alta Moda collection, with its couture interpretations of Sicilian style — widows' veils, black lace and swishing crinolines that seemed plucked from the set of "The Leopard" — to an audience that included Monica Bellucci, Isabella Rossellini and Anna Wintour.

Since 2010, the cloister has also served as an alfresco bar with soft piano music, crisply attired waiters and flickering votives — a glamorous scene befitting an earlier era in which a youthful Marcello Mastroianni might have clinked glasses with friends at a nearby table. Soaking up the atmosphere, we sipped Champagne cocktails and chatted with our waiter, who offered to sneak us into the guests-only gardens behind the hotel. After tiptoeing down a wide hallway, we descended some steps into a lush terraced oasis of orange trees, roses and bougainvillea-draped arches. Had we not had a dinner reservation to honor, we would have wandered around the tranquil gardens all night.

But instead we exited the grounds and crossed the street to Osteria Nero d'Avola, where a waiter whisked us upstairs to a packed rooftop terrace. Glasses of prosecco and a plate of bruschetta quickly appeared on our table, followed by a basket of bread and what would turn out to be a

point of particular pride — several bottles of olive oil. Before long, the restaurant's gregarious chef, Turi Siligato, who was weaving among tables explaining the provenance of each oil — this one from Ragusa, that one from Noto — arrived bearing a large jar of preserved white olives.

"White olives are very rare," he said, proffering one with a spoon. "but the flavor is extraordinary." To further illustrate the freshness of his products, the chef, an ardent proponent of the Slow Food movement, then pulled out his cellphone and scrolled through photos of himself, harvesting olives in some, wearing a wet suit with a fresh catch of sea urchins in another. When our primi arrived, he insisted on suggesting oils — one stronger, the other more delicate — to pair with our respective dishes.

The next day, I rode a cable car down to the pebbly waterfront, where after a brief hike and a quick clamber through knee-high water, I discovered the Isola Bella nature preserve. The secluded islet, covered with exotic flora, was crisscrossed by trails with postcard-worthy views of the bay's crystal-clear waters. Afterward, I retreated to the seaside terrace of the nearby Villa Sant'Andrea — the sister property to the renowned Grand Hotel Timeo on the hilltop — for an aperitivo. The friendly service and direct views over Mazzarò beach offered by the less-heralded sibling again proved that the better pick was the less ostentatious option.

That concept was reinforced later that night at our dinner at a one-Michelin-starred restaurant where the creative swirls and strokes made more mischief than magic. Instead, the one place that did leave me with stars in my eyes, the place I now dream about, the place for which I would return to Taormina, was Da Cristina, a nondescript pizzeria that trades in takeout — and those unforgettable arancini. There may be no table service, but peek behind the counter and you'll find thick-crust pizza topped with artichoke and eggplant, cheese-stuffed sfoglie, and arancini with the perfect balance of rice, cheese, ragù and peas coated in a thin fried shell that lends a satisfying crunch to every bite. If I were resigned to eat only one thing for the rest of my life, those arancini would be it. And to think I once had doubts about this town.

#### IF YOU GO

The **Hotel Metropole** (Corso Umberto, 154; [hotelmetrotaormina.it](http://hotelmetrotaormina.it)) is an urbane antidote to Taormina's grand antiques-strewn hotels; it has 23 minimalist rooms and suites and an ideal location beside Piazza IX Aprile. Doubles from 352 euros or \$447, at \$1.27 to the euro.

In addition to the **Cloister Lounge Bar**, the **San Domenico Palace Hotel** (Piazza San Domenico, 5; [san-domenico-palace.com](http://san-domenico-palace.com)) has a two-Michelin-starred restaurant and 105 rooms with doubles starting at 273 euros.

Reserve well in advance for a table on the terrace at **Osteria Nero d'Avola** (Piazza San Domenico, 2B; [osterianerodavola.com](http://osterianerodavola.com)). Dinner for two about 70 euros.

Stop at the beachside bar at the **Villa Sant'Andrea** (Via Nazionale, 137; [hotelvillasantandrea.com](http://hotelvillasantandrea.com)).

Find **Da Cristina** (Via Strabone, 2; 39-0942-21171) down an alley off Piazza Duomo, where arancini and slices of pizza cost 2 euros each.

Famous for its icy granita, **Bam Bar** (Via di Giovanni, 45; 39-0942-24355) is a cool spot to escape the crowds on Corso Umberto.