

# WEST IS BEST



**'A promise of sunny  
late March weather and  
highs of 20 degrees'**

Travelling during its colourful Easter celebrations, **Chris Allsop** discovers lesser-known Western Sicily has something for everyone, including his young children

**T**he drums started up, staccato and militaristic. The crowd is almost entirely dressed in black with stylish dark glasses (it is Italy, after all). From out of the church's baroque facade, held aloft by teams of men, slowly emerged the first of the near-life-size sculptural bible scenes that have been part of the Misteri di Trapani procession since 1612. As the brass band struck up the lament that would resound through the historic centre for the next 24-hours, my four-year-old son shifted his weight on my tiring shoulders. Was Italy's longest religious procession a cultural highlight too far for me and my family?

Having solo-explored Sicily's eastern coast with its highlights of Syracuse, Taormina, and Etna, I'd always wanted to return and see the west. Palazzi-strewn Palermo, the mountain-backed beaches of the south, and the medieval Misteri di Trapani—an icon of Sicily's famously ebullient Easter celebrations. With a shared adoration of Italian cuisine, my wife and I were hungry to uncover the secrets of the Sicilian kitchen: its wild fennel and anchovy robustness, aubergine obsession, and street food spectaculars such as Palermo's fried beef spleen panini.

However, that's not how we sold it to Ada (six) and Rafe (four).

"Pizza, beaches, gelato!"

They scrambled upstairs to pack their teddies.

Travelling ahead of the Easter weekend, it's possible to find good value flights from London to the atmospheric capital of Palermo. As Italians pile in for Easter, prices jump. However, return flights to London from the smaller, more westerly airport of Trapani-Birgi remain competitive, even on Easter Sunday.

So our itinerary was dictated: a ten-day loop of western Sicily commencing in Palermo, dropping down to the historically one-degree warmer southern coast near Agrigento, before finishing with Easter in Trapani.

Due to the often patchy weather, many coastal resorts and hotels in Sicily only open in April, some as late as mid-month. But having arrived in Palermo's historic centre at night, we awoke in our self-catered flat to a forecast of a sunny late-March with highs of 20 degrees.

We emerged beach-ready onto the narrow streets to find the locals still in scarves and insulated jackets. Scooters weaved past as we clung to the sunny sides of lanes, making our way to →



From left: the coastal resort of Cefalù; Italy's longest Easter procession at Misteri di Trapani, Western Sicily



the steps of the hulking Massimo Theatre, Italy's largest. Here we met Irene who runs Isola di Persefone—a Sicily-wide tour guide company with a line in youth-friendly itineraries. Having considered our children's ages, Irene had developed a special two-hour tour that would give my wife and I a spin around a few highlights while also keeping the children entertained.

Over the next two hours, her tour conjured Greek myths, theatrical phantoms, and hirsute Egyptian saints. While the children were having their imaginations fed, with

snacks of spongy sfinciuni—a pizza/focaccia hybrid—to help maintain focus, my wife and I were being dazzled by Palermo's maximal Sicilian Baroque style.

When Rafe is caught short, we were grateful that Irene's knowledge extended to which holy places offered public toilets. The diversion loses us the UNESCO-listed mosaics of the Martorana church but gains us more time browsing miniature marzipan fruits in a 13th-century pasticceria. They're bought and devoured on the stone steps of the Monastery of Saint Catherine's exquisitely tiled courtyard before the sugar-rushing children begin to run frenzied laps around the central fountain.

As we parted, Irene recommends visiting Mondello Beach, near where she lives. At this time of the year, she says, Palermo's photogenic parabola of marzipan yellow sand is at its best, devoid of pricey beach club loungers. Alas, we've already planned a day trip to Cefalù tomorrow, the coastal resort half an hour east of the capital. I ask her if anyone is swimming in the water yet at Mondello.

"Just the foreigners," she laughed, before intercepting the orbiting

children for a farewell.

Cefalù, perfectly angled to catch the sunset, is a long strip of beach backed by resorts, a sand-coloured cathedral, and a picturesque mountain over which rambles distant crenelations. It's a blissful first beach day of the year. Pizza by the slice, beautifully clear—and bracing—water that's shallow for ages, and UNESCO-listed mosaics in the duomo that alas will only open for the season, two days after our visit.

Wary of child burnout, we left much of Palermo undone—the souk-like markets, the Norman fortress, even the beef spleen sarnies. Equipped with a rental hybrid Fiat Panda we beetled through the inscrutable traffic system and out into the surprisingly lush, hilly interior bound for Segesta.

A stop on the 19th century Grand Tour, Segesta is a former city of one of Sicily's indigenous peoples, the Elymians. Influenced by classical Greece, the remains of this hilltop city are mesmerizing, its centrepiece temple like a more intact Parthenon.

An historical mystery surrounds this golden-stone colossus: why did the Elymians never add a roof? We



**'One of the most blissful first beach days of the year'**

devise a novel new theory: perhaps it blew away? The warm Sicilian sun had become obscured by swathes of black cloud funnelling in from the coast. The winds pulled at the children's hair. When the sun flashed on, the pathways glowed with hummocks of vivid wildflowers. Ada took photos on her compact for her flower-loving grannies back home.

The children did well with the temple, although by the time they're on the shuttle bus to the top section of ruins, interest has begun to wane. After absorbing the panoramas at the stunningly sited theatre, we slammed the car doors on the gales and charted a southerly, sun-seeking course to the Rocco Forte Verdura Resort.

A long scheduled few days of indulgence, the 230-acre resort is a family and golfer's paradise. There's an extensive Kids Club, two championship golf courses (the East Course was refurbished in 2022), and even a PADI Dive Centre should you wish, for some reason, to leave the spa. We arrived at this Forte fiefdom in late afternoon, having stopped off at nearby Sambuco di Sicilia for garlicky bowls of pasta alla Norma and a tear around its Arabic tangle of streets.

The swiftest way to transit between beach, spa, and bar is by bike (or by summoning the van if it's raining). With even training wheels available, trips to dinner became confidence-burnishing opportunities for Rafe to practice his pedalling.

On the first night in fine-dining

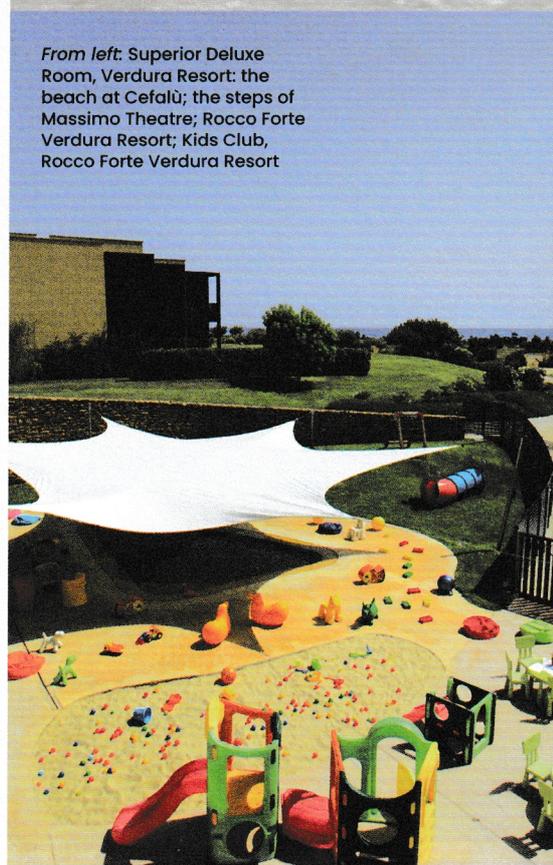
Zagara, we felt like we were the most unstable quantity in a well-oiled machine. There were plenty of other families, but ours was the youngest by a few years. Happily, throughout the stay, Verdura's kitchens were well-drilled in the importance of the children's food arriving swiftly. No such concerns at the breakfast buffets, however, the children sweeping through the pastries like conquering Carthaginians. Ada also fulfilled her dream of "ice cream for breakfast" (actually slushy granita with a brioche for dipping) from the buffet's comprehensive Sicilian section.

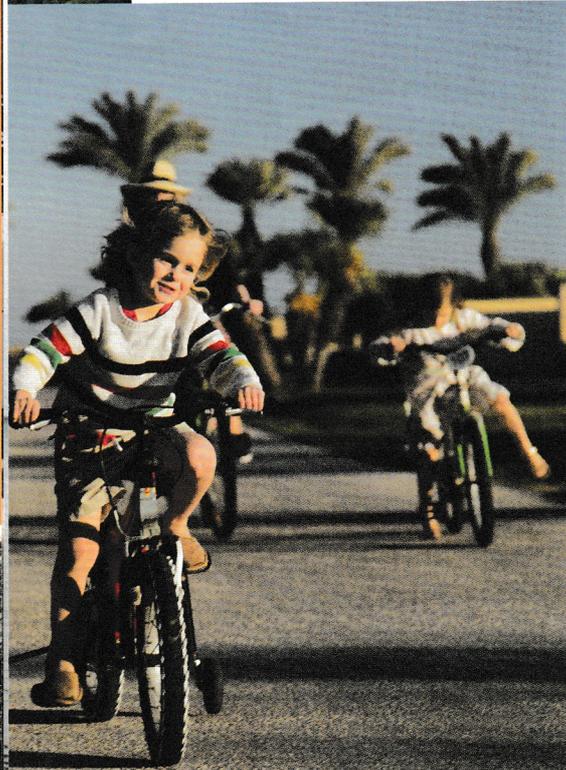
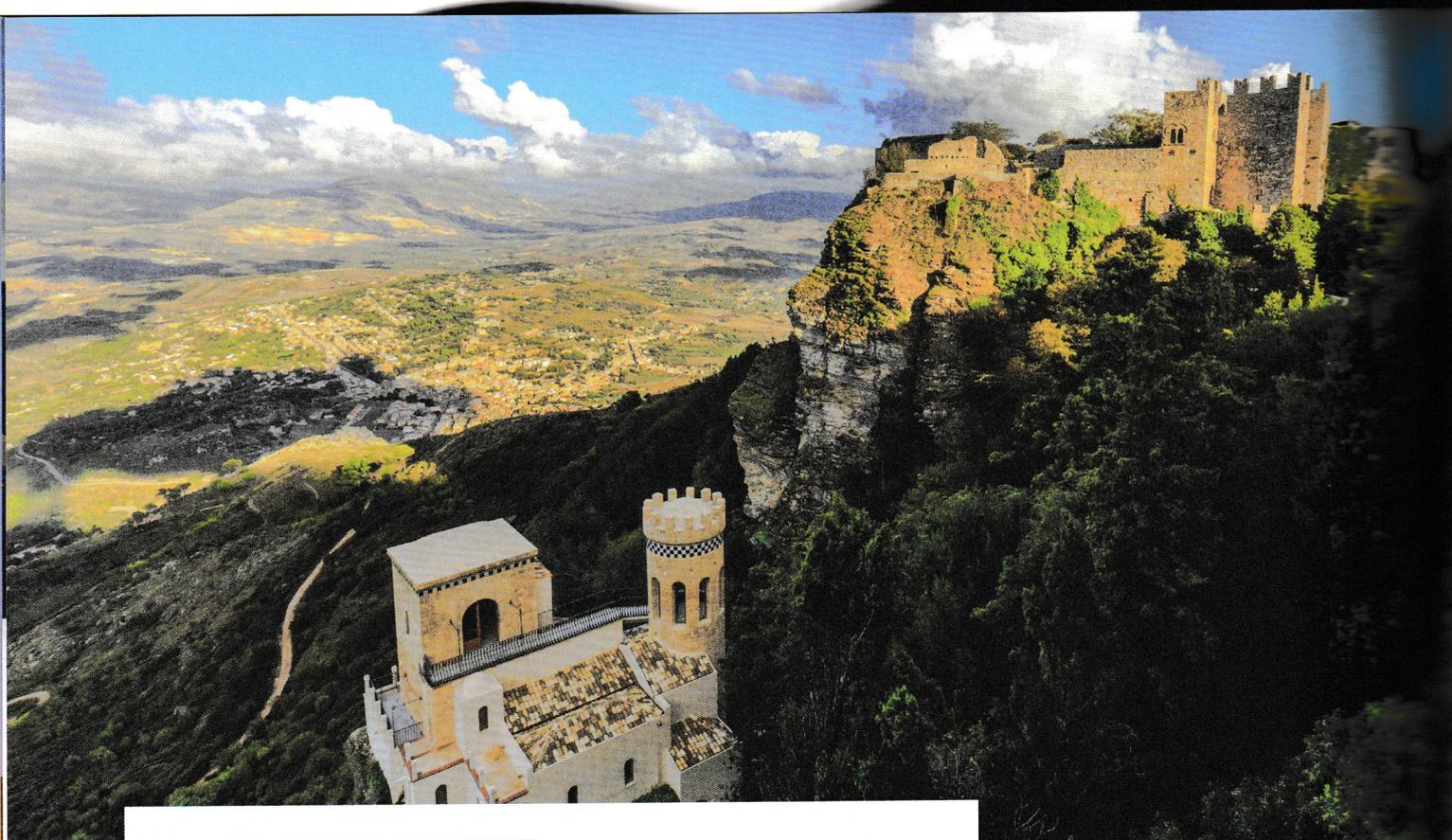
Rain spoiled play the first morning. From our golf course and sea view veranda, we watched the bunker sand darken while, further out, the ocean phased between emerald green and saturnine blue beneath the rainclouds blowing in from the direction of North Africa. The downpour was well timed: our spacious suite was the ideal bolthole to wait out the weather, the superfluity of oversized cushions ideal structural fodder for competing dens in the living area.

Beneath afternoon sunshine, we gingerly, guiltily delivered the children to super smiley Giovanna and Elisa in the Kids Club, where children aged four to 12 have free access to its facilities and schedule of activities. Swifts skimmed the limpid surface of the children's heated pool before arrowing into nests built in the eaves. As we backed out of the door for our spa appointment, even the more →



From left: Superior Deluxe Room, Verdura Resort; the beach at Cefalù; the steps of Massimo Theatre; Rocco Forte Verdura Resort; Kids Club, Rocco Forte Verdura Resort





delicate Rafe barely gave us a glance.

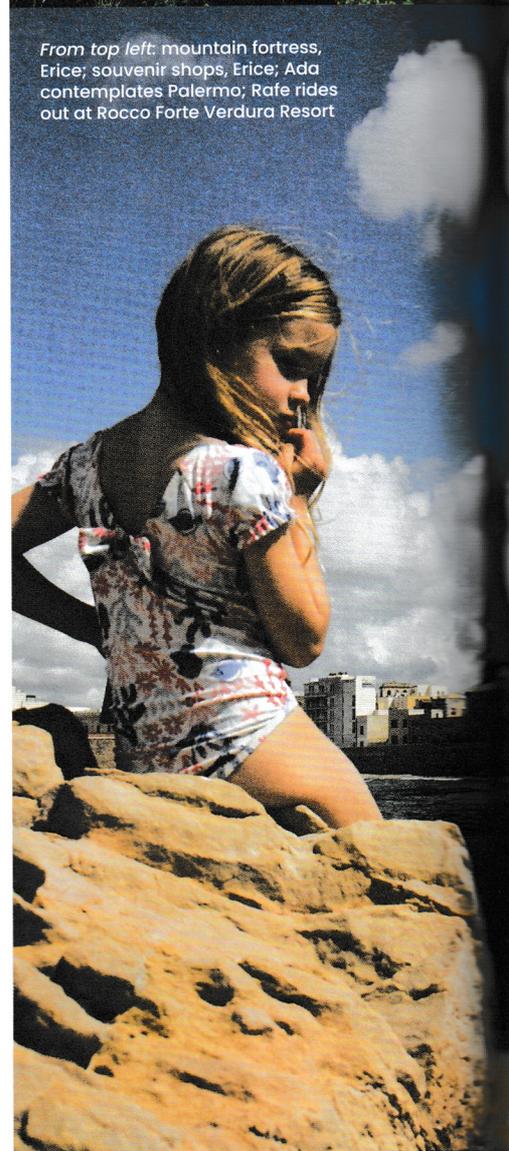
After we'd brined ourselves in the quartet of Thalasso therapy pools and coveted the Sicilian ceramic clocks on the walls of the 4,000 square metre spa, we returned refreshed and pink with sun to find our two children with painted faces—Ada a rainbow, Rafe a snake. They're tired but it's still hard to drag Ada away from one last exciting game of Buckaroo with Giovanna. "I love it," she whispered as I picked her up. Another guilt-free drop off followed the next day.

Verdura was always going to be a hard act to follow. To fend off pouts, we had booked glamping at Duca il Castelmonte—an agriturismo (farm stay) on the anonymous outskirts of Trapani. After two hours along a westerly highway that felt as if it had been resurfaced by a fracking company, we pulled in beneath the shady pines and crooked cactus trees of the agriturismo. We felt instantly immersed in a bucolic escape, despite being only a few minutes' drive from an expressway exit and a sizeable Lidl.

Our accommodation—one of three on the olive-oil producing farm—was more of a fabric-covered, tent-shaped cabin rather than something a scout master would approve of, complete with its own deck, kitchen, and bathroom. Ada swiftly secured the high bunk in the eaves. Despite money-saving, self-catering good intentions, we ordered takeout from the agriturismo's highly rated restaurant. The busiate alla Trapanese pasta—a local tomato-and-almond-take on Genovese pesto—was probably the most delicious dish of our trip. We ate it on the terrace, wrapped up against the cool of the evening, listening to the "va be-ne, va be-ne" of the pigeons in the gathering dusk.

From here, we made day trips to Sicily's north-west corner, home to some of the island's most untouched and attractive coastline. Outrageously picturesque Scopello with its sea stacks; the pristine sands of the Zingaro National Reserve; and the

From top left: mountain fortress, Erice; souvenir shops, Erice; Ada contemplates Palermo; Rafe rides out at Rocco Forte Verdura Resort



resort of Castellammare del Golfo for a deserted, shell-rich beach and superb hazelnut gelato. Overhead, the breeze strummed through the knitted Easter decorations and ribbons criss-crossing on the main street.

Another half-day highlight was the historic hilltop village of Erice, reached by child-delighting cable car, and where my wife endured every souvenir shop in its antique patterned streets to fulfil a promise to an indecisive Rafe.

In this fashion, Good Friday rolled around. We moved into a flat in Trapani's lively centro storico, located on exactly the same street as the church where the Misteri di Trapani procession begins and ends.

To stay on theme, if you're built like Samson then it's definitely best to remain amid the intoxicating throng with your children held shoulder-high. However, running on cannoli fumes, I collapsed beneath Rafe's weight in minutes. We retreated to the flat, intent on pacing ourselves. As the wobbling sculptural platforms passed by, we caught tantalising glimpses of them from our balcony. In need of distraction, Ada and Rafe made their own fresh orange juice, as laments echoed along the narrow streets.

Our vitamin C levels dangerously high, we made brief forays into the crowds, Ada keen to see all 20 platforms (in the end we managed eight). Retreat was sounded in the face of four-year-old overstimulation and the penny sweets and balloon hawkers that drew our kids like whiny moths.

The best part? This will sound like madness, but it was being woken at three am when the night procession

returns on its loop through the city. You think: surely they can't strike up the brass at this hour? Yes they can. Wrapped up and watching them from our balcony, the strange spectacle gave us goose bumps and reminded us of our pre-family existence, before sleep was a rare commodity.

Best of all, while the procession may have woken the dead, it didn't wake the kids. ✈

## THE LOWDOWN

### HOW TO GET THERE

Direct UK flights to western Sicily take from 3 hours.

### WHERE TO STAY

Verdura Resort family rooms (2 adults, 2 children) B&B, from £969 per night  
[roccofortehotels.com/hotels-and-resorts/verdura-resort](http://roccofortehotels.com/hotels-and-resorts/verdura-resort)

### GOOD TO KNOW

Esplora Travel is a Sicily specialist organising family travel  
 (2 adults, 2 children) from £1,950 per week

[esplora.co.uk](http://esplora.co.uk)

Guided tours with Isola de Persefone from £132 for 4 hours

[isoladipersefone.com](http://isoladipersefone.com)

Return tickets on the Erice Cableway from £8.37

[funiviaerice.it](http://funiviaerice.it)

