

TRAVEL

EUROPE

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



Remains of a 5th century BC Greek temple in Agrigento, Sicily, Italy. 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, Rosa Marie gave birth to my maternal grandfather in a Pennsylvania coal-mining town.

Although 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 tradi-

tions and 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.

Although 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.

SEE EUROPE, K2

SICILY

Chasing documents to prove my bloodline and gain citizenship

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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



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

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



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

Continues from K1

Noting my interest, 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 stigliola 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 between the 9th and 11th centuries and has Ara-



Temple of Concordia, one of the three most complete temples in the Valley of Temples, built in the 5th century B.C.



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

bic influences. A Cleveland cassata cake, on the other hand, is sponge cake layered with strawberries and custard, frosted with whipped cream.

Although 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 Agrigento.



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

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 people who have built and influenced Sicilian culture and contributed their DNA to the genetic diaspora.

Although 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 pine nuts. 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.

SICILY

Chasing documents to prove my bloodline



Like many tourists, the author reenacts a scene from “The Godfather Part III” on the steps of the Palermo opera house. *Jennifer Sontag*

Continues from K1

After seeing my friend Jennifer Sontag go through the process a few years ago, I was motivated. Not only did she gain citizenship, but she moved to Terrasini, her great-grandparent’s hometown in Sicily. There, she started advising others on the process.

“Other people were asking questions that I could answer from my research and experience,” she says. “That started conversations and I started helping them. Over the next 10 months, I helped 12 other people be successfully recognized as Italian. During the time of helping those dozen people, I realized how much time, skill and knowledge goes into this. That spawned the idea that this could be a business.”

The Italian Citizenship Concierge was born. I became a beneficiary of Sontag’s knowledge.

Sontag is a serial entrepreneur. When she lived in Cleveland from 2013 to 2018, she operated the women’s clothing boutique Makers by Marks in Tremont. (At the time, she was Jennifer Marks.)

If she could do it, so could I. Or could I? As the keeper of stories and genealogy for my mother’s Sicilian-American family, I was interested in the cultures and people who came before me. I wanted to excavate more about the past. I had the dates and places to work with, but I didn’t speak or write Italian.

To dig deeper, I needed official copies of birth and marriage records from my great-grandparents’ birthplace. Getting them would give me an opportunity to learn more about my own place in history.

But how would I travel to Sicily? Where would I get records? How would I communicate my interest to Italian-speaking town officials? How much would it cost? What would I do with it? I was nearly paralyzed by the unknowns.

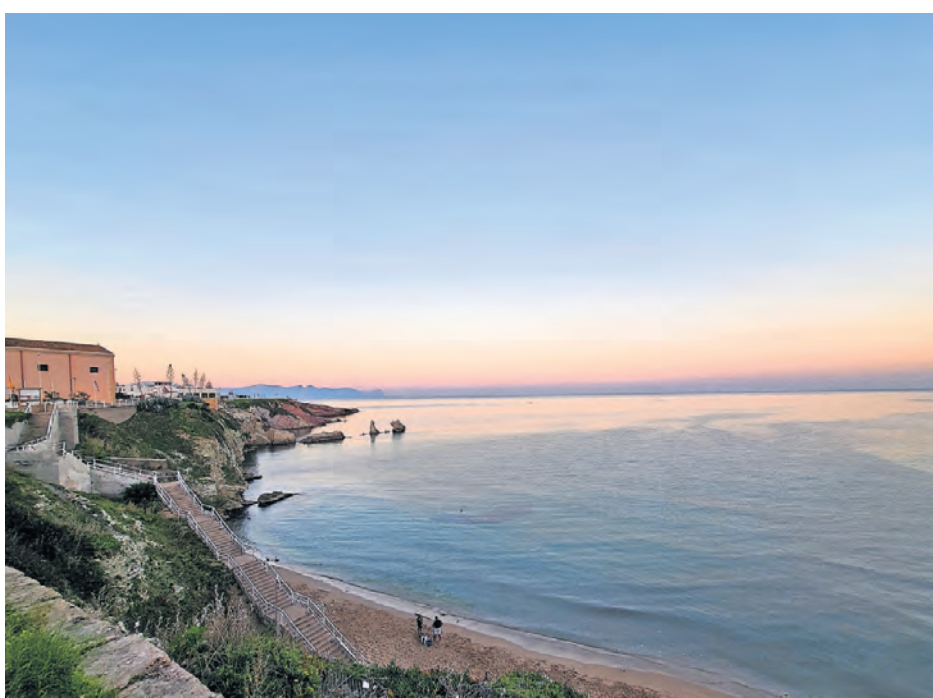
Sontag offered help and encouraged me to visit. In a moment of post-pandemic restlessness, I abandoned my fears and leaned into that citizenship quest. After all, you only live once.

I bought a round-trip Lufthansa ticket between Cleveland and Palermo. My plan was to spend a few days collecting documents, but the flight cost \$1,100 whether I stayed four days or two weeks. So I extended my trip. I’m grateful I did, as I learned much about my family’s culture. For one thing, being Sicilian feels different from being mainland Italian. (But that’s another story.)

In October 2022, we drove Sontag’s little white Fiat through the northern Sicilian countryside to Grotte in the Sicilian province of Agrigento. Grotte is about 9 miles from the province capital, also named Agrigento. The capital was founded by the Greeks in 531 B.C. and is known for the remnants of ancient temples found there. Despite proximity to a city with ancient roots (and to my disap-



A house in Grotte, Sicily, Italy from the author’s great grandparents’ neighborhood. *Paris Wolfe, cleveland.com*



The Tyrrhenian Sea is just a few blocks from Jennifer Sontag’s Terrasini apartment. *Paris Wolfe, cleveland.com*



San Francesco Church in Grotte, Sicily, Italy, is closed. The town has fewer than half the residents it did in the early 1900s. *Paris Wolfe, cleveland.com*

pointment), Grotte is unremarkable and not part of any tourist trail.

We arrived at 11:30 a.m., just before the Sicilians break for riposo. The office would close at 1 p.m. and not reopen until 5 p.m. (Riposo is the Italian version of a siesta. Businesses and shops close. Workers go home for a long lunch and/or rest.)

“I suoi bisnonni sono nati qui, a Grotte,” Sontag told city officials. Basically, that meant my great-grandparents were from Grotte.

Using documents that I’d brought from home (downloaded from Ancestry.com), she communicated that I wanted certified originals of birth and marriage certificates. After a lot of smiles and nods, we were told to return the next day.

When we returned, the administrators provided the documents. Then they took a large, 150-year-old leather-bound record book from the shelf and pointed to handwritten names on aged paper where census information was written about my great-grandparents. We identified their neighborhood — near San Francesco Chiesa (St. Francis Church). And so, I walked their streets wondering which of the crumbling two-story stone structures had held the young Ciranni family in the late 19th century.

The sad state of the neighborhood was discouraging. Like many people, I envisioned being part of something bigger, somehow grander. It may have been more interesting to be chased by a woman with an artichoke a la the Di Grassos of “The White Lotus.”

Now that I’ve gathered the toughest documents, it’s time to collect those from rural Pennsylvania where my family settled after arriving in the United States. I’m not sure if or what I’ll learn about myself and my family, but I’m on a mission.