

DISCOVER

ITALY



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# Secret seaside

Lee Marshall celebrates one of Sicily's last remaining stretches of unspoilt coastline

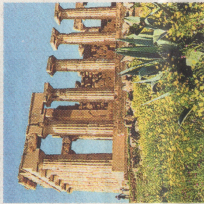


HELSA WAT/THINKSTOCK

Sands of time: the beach at Foce del Belice, above, looks much as it must have done when Greek settlers built the temples of Selinunte, below, on a nearby headland in the fifth century BC

## FOCE DEL BELICE SICILY

They had a feel for location, those Ancient Greeks. On the southwest coast of Sicily, the colony of Selinunte once thrived on a low cliff of sandy clay above a buff-coloured beach that stretches for miles on either side. The Doric temple that dominates the seaward part of the site is covered in terracotta, sea urchins, gorse and other plants. It was built on Greek, that almost certainly gave the settlement its name. When the connoisseur and art collector Richard Payne Knight visited Selinunte in 1777, this was a desolate, wild and romantic place. He knew as much because he had been there with his train, Jacob Philipp Hecker and Charles Gore, whose job it



was to chart their patron's travels and several of their watercolours of Selinus, as it was then known, are now in the British Museum. Corners of the site are still as subtly intact today as the long-homed cattle amid the ruins; but the seaward view has changed beyond recognition. For years, a combination of malaria and poverty kept development to a minimum along this pristine coastline. However, Selinunte, once a scatter of fishermen's shacks to the east of the temple mound, has become a sprawl of seaside houses and cheerful beach diners with names like Boomerang Bar and Ballo's Castle. The result is that this jerry-built resort and you get to one of Sicily's best beaches, a two-mile-long stretch of golden sand that since 1984 has been part of the Foce del Belice nature reserve. Here, at last, is the unspoilt wilderness charmed by those early Greeks. The beach is wide and flat, is the peace and space to enjoy it.



are also some lovely secluded coves further to the west, such as Capparrina di Mare, with its sea-turtle colony and scatter of Chamaepop dwarf palms. This is the mouth of the Belice river, from which the reserve takes its name; it's not unusual to see kingfishers along here. Agaves, sea daffodils and sea rocket sprout straight out of the sand in some stretches. On the map, Selinunte is a tiny speck. The Foce del Belice, in fact, the surrounding area has plenty of

## ESSENTIALS

### GETTING THERE

British Airways (0844 493 0767; [ba.com](http://ba.com)) flies from Gatwick to Catania; Ryanair ([ryanair.com](http://ryanair.com)) from Stansted to Palermo and Gatwick to Palermo; not all flights are available out of season. Selinunte is 90 minutes' drive from Palermo airport. A car is needed to get the most out of the area, but bus from Trapani to Selinunte is available. For tailor-made trips, contact specialist Think Sicily (020 7377 8518; [thinksicily.com](http://thinksicily.com)).

### THE INSIDE TRACK

● Lemon granita (lemon-iced) is a Sicilian speciality. For a first-queer, see Zo (lunch) Aurelio in Sciacca makes what many consider to be the island's best at Bar Roma, Piazza della Dogana 12. ● Cooking schools are a penny in Italy these days, but the day courses held by talented chef Angelo Purnilia at La Forestale (see "The Best Places to Stay") are a real treat. ● The ruins of Selinunte are scattered ruins to life, book a guided tour from the Sicilian culture and history experts, Passage to Sicily ([passagetosicily.com](http://passagetosicily.com)).

### WHAT TO AVOID

- Coming too early in the season: the sea here is cooler than in much of Sicily and doesn't really warm up until June.
- Getting caught out when you return the hire car: Palermo doesn't have a petrol station within the airport perimeter.

### THE BEST PLACES TO STAY

● **Il Cuore di Dioniso, Selinunte** €€ This is a more than design hotel, but this restored baiajo (traditional farm) and olive grove island from Selinunte is fantastic value for money, and the restaurant offers tasty local cuisine (0039 0924 941 046; [ilcuoreidioniso.com](http://ilcuoreidioniso.com); doubles from €70/€55).

### La Forestale, Menfi

Operated by leading wine producer Planeta in 2009, this cool and modern hotel is one of the best in Sicily. Each of the 14 chic rooms has its own private terrace and the creative Sicilian restaurant is worth a trip in its own right (0925 195 5460; [planetataste.it](http://planetataste.it); doubles from €160/€126).

### Acquamarina & Profondo Blu, Riserva Foce del Belice

These two villas stand just above the beach in one of the most protected and secluded parts of the reserve. Both are luxurious. Those who prefer a more traditional Sicilian style should book at the creative restaurant (0039 0924 941 046; [ilcuoreidioniso.com](http://ilcuoreidioniso.com); weekly rental from €2,370/£1,874 for two).

### THE BEST RESTAURANTS

● **Boomerang Bar, Marinella di Selinunte** €€ It's just a simple beach bar, but the seafood antipasto spread that they serve here is one of the best on the island coast, and so is the lemon granita. Open daily. Try to save some room for the lemon granita. Around €16 Wednesday lunch.

### Da Vittorio, Porto Palo

This unassuming beachside restaurant is one of Giorgio Corbelli's best. Look for the lemon granita. Order that Sicilian classic, sarda a beccafico, a sweet-and-sour baked sardine dish. Around €22 per head (Via Friuli Venezia Giulia 9; 0925 78381; open daily).

### Hosteria del Vico, Sciacca

A cure gourmet trattoria in a Sciacca back lane, the Hosteria prides itself on making good things out of the best and freshest local produce. Try the sarda a beccafico. Around €28 per head (Vico Sammartano 10; 0925 23071; [hosteriadelvico.it](http://hosteriadelvico.it); closed Monday).

### DID YOU KNOW?

Lemon and almond granita (see p. 16) is a Sicilian speciality. It's best enjoyed on a hot day, with a splash of the sun.

under-advertised draws. A little inland and to the east, Menfi, rebuilt after 1968, is at the centre of one of the island's great wine-growing areas, and the coastal town of Sciacca beyond has a reputation as Barossa. The inhabitants seem to live outside all year round, indulging in the Sicilian pleasures of eating, drinking, strolling and chatting. But my favourite trip in the area is to Cavà Sciacca. This was the quarry from which Selinunte's masons hewed the stone that went into the town's great temples. They were cut and dressed on the coast, when the Carthaginians attacked Selinunte in 409 BC, the site was abandoned. Great stone drums lie beneath lentisk and almond trees, in a long shallow gorge of a quarry that is a carpet of limestone. Selinunte's *Opuzza* (see p. 16) buttermilk and bonage replacing the lone and level sands.