

This summer I had the opportunity to study in three different cities in Sicily at three different language schools: Babilonia in Taormina; i Fiori Blu di Sicilia in Agrigento; Scuola Virgilio in Trapani. Each had its own personality and style. I would not have traded these experiences for anything. I gained more than I would have imagined during this month in La Bella Sicilia where the sun filled skies reflect the warmth of its people's hearts.

Destinations: Countries - Italy; Regions/Cities - Sicily

Categories: Hotels/B&Bs; Vacation Rentals; Language Classes; Independent Travel; Single Traveler

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Sicily - Italy's Paradise

Sicily, with a population of 5 million and the largest region in Italy, has been invaded over the centuries by the Normans, Arabs, French, Spaniards and Germans. Sicilians pride themselves on their ability to survive and incorporate into their culture the best from each of their oppressors. Sicily is beginning to thrive economically from the newest wave of invasion; namely, the tourists or in my case, the student.

Each of the language schools I attended helped me secure comfortable accommodations at a modest cost.

Babilonia Italian Language School in Taormina set the stage for my one month stay in Sicily. Of Sicilian heritage, I had always wanted to immerse myself in the culture of my ancestors. The longstanding success of Babilonia made it an excellent choice. I now wish I had stayed longer in Taormina, the Pearl of eastern Sicily. This year Babilonia was selected as one of the Four Star Italian Language Schools for foreigners. The award was noted in Language Travel Magazine.

The school offers an array of classes in addition to the language sessions. One can take pottery and cooking classes or go diving and hiking while at Babilonia. Special trips are also organized for students who come from all over the world. Babilonia now offers special language and activity classes for adults over the age of 50 through its annual 50+Plus Program. The skilled instructors assess a student's ability level through comprehensive written and oral conversation exams, which are administered on the first day of class. So, no time is wasted assigning classes, which have an average of eight students, thus allowing each student adequate time for involvement and participation. The class day is divided in two: grammar and conversation with a coffee/cappuccino break in between. The school is housed in an old villa and has an open air patio – a lovely setting for relaxation and conversation. The cheerful welcoming atmosphere of the school is a huge plus. Additionally, computers are available for Internet and report writing. The staff helps students with accommodation choices: one can live with a family, or stay in a local hotel or apartment.

It is easy to get distracted in Taormina, one of the most charming cities in Sicily. Magnificent views of the sea are everywhere in this ancient hillside city built by the Greeks. Walks through the pedestrian only main streets and piazzas are most enjoyable. On Sundays and in the evenings, one can see how Taormina is just a big small town, as everyone greets each other. It is also apparent that the locals are very fashion conscious and like to get dressed up when they do their evening stroll (passagiata). Too cool!

A day's outing brings me to Mount Etna, Europe's largest active volcano. After a bus, funivia, and four wheel van ride, we reach the highest allowable area and then hike for about 40 minutes. It is an amazing experience. Fortunately, it is a quiet day (no eruptions). I feel the ground and it is warm. For more information visit: Babilonia (under web resources at the end) or e-mail info@babilonia.it Tel/Fax (+39) 0942.23441

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I then head to Agrigento, an ancient city settled by the Greeks, where I study with Stefania Tardino, the owner of i Fiori Blu di Sicilia (Info: info@fioribludisicilia.com +39-338-2857202 link under Web Resources), who tailors the lessons for me. She is both knowledgeable and passionate about the history of Sicily. Our sessions are held in the Luigi Pirandello Library, a tribute to the Nobel Prize winning writer. The energy emanating from Pirandello's works and his personal letters is apparent. Talk about being in the ZONE; I am there. My biggest regret is that I am not an Italian literature scholar. To have access to all this and not take advantage of it, is a shame.

I hope that my article inspires others to go to Agrigento and stay a while, studying and immersing themselves in his genius. Years ago, I attended an Off-Broadway performance of Luigi Pirandello's *Six Characters in Search of an Author*. Never did I imagine that one day I would be in his birthplace.

Our Italian language sessions are a mix of Sicilian history and culture lectures and grammar exercises. Stefania prepares well in advance of my arrival and e-mails me about my expectations. She far exceeds them. Stefania's pleasant manner and love for her work is apparent.

The director and staff at the Pirandello Library are hospitable and accessible. During my stay they invite me to Casa Pirandello (now a museum) for the 141st anniversary celebration of the author's birth. This is a special time.

Stefania also arranges for a meeting with Enzo Sarda, the director of the Leonardo Sciascia Foundation in Racamuto, the birthplace of my father. Again I am in the midst of genius. Sciascia and Pirandello are two of Sicily's highly regarded literary geniuses. The Foundation houses all the works and personal letters of Sciascia. I will have to return as an Italian literature scholar to take advantage of these treasures.

Being in Racalmuto is magical. I am able to find the house where my father was born, as well the notice of his birth in the city hall records. Forget computers, the ink from 1902 posting is still legible. This is amazing to me.

I spend one afternoon in the Valley of the Temples, a very well preserved historical site and major tourist attraction for Agrigento. One can only be in awe at the magnitude of these colossal structures erected over 2,500 years ago. Set high on the hills of Agrigento, they are a true architectural wonder and have been designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage site.

The oldest part of Agrigento, with its warren of cobble stoned steep streets (most with steps), gives the visitor a true sense of times past, the myriad of Baroque styled churches with impressive art collections.

My last stop is Trapani. Named for one of Italy's (albeit Roman) poets, Scuola Virgilio is part of a cultural association. Trapani, a major port city with a population of 75,000, is located in the northwest part of Sicily. It is known for its beautiful sunsets and magnificent views, as well as its extensive salt deposits. Steeped in history, Trapani was dominated by the Carthaginians, then the Romans, Arabs and Normans, as well as Spanish. My mother was raised near Trapani, so I was most interested in connecting with my roots.

Trapani is an excellent historical setting for Scuola Virgilio (Tel: +39.0923.526002 info@scuolavirgilio.it link under Web Resources). The owners, Stefano Grillo and Vitalba Martorana, are both competent teachers and charismatic individuals, as is the staff. Their enthusiasm for the Italian language, history and culture of Sicily is noteworthy. These are the key factors in the success of this fledgling venture. With a dedicated international following, Scuola Virgilio is poised to make a name for itself.

Classes are small and personal attention is the key. Participation in class is a focal point of the instructional method. A mixture of grammar, oral reading and small group conversation, coupled with enthusiastic instructors make for an ideal learning environment. Housed in an old palazzo on the pedestrian only Via Garibaldi, Scuola Virgilio has classrooms which are large and airy. If you are lucky, your classroom will have a balcony and sea view. Although homework assignments are not lengthy, individual advancement is always based on time spent in independent study. Classes are held from 9:30am – 11:00am then there is a 30 minute café break with the resumption of class from 11:30am – 1:00pm (Monday – Friday). Excursions (and cooking classes) are organized based on student interest. Within a short period of time, one can feel at home in this old world city.

Once you figure it out, getting around Sicily by bus is fairly easy. Transportation to outlining cities is provided at a very low cost and on air-conditioned coach buses, which almost always carry fewer than a dozen passengers. Local city bus service within the major cities of Sicily is plentiful. Wine, olive oil, seafood, beaches and sunshine make for a winning combination while studying the Italian language in Sicily. Before you realize it, you will be meeting and greeting the locals with ease.

Paula Giangreco Cullison

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Resources
