

Poised between Sicily and the coast of Tunisia, sculpted by wind, sea and the earth's upheaval, the rugged and exhilarating island of Pantelleria ensnares visitors and locals alike.

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LIFE ON THE ROCKS

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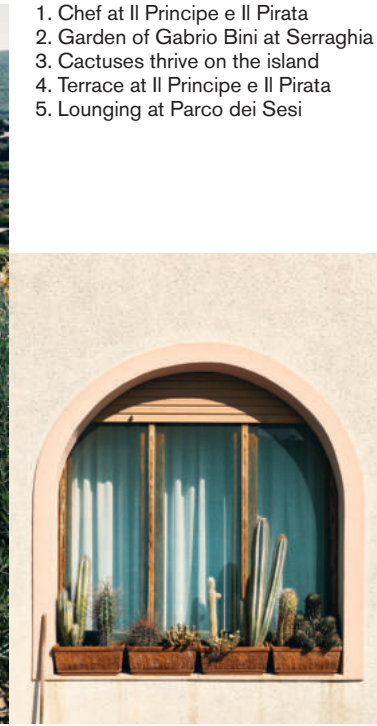
1. Swimming between volcanic rocks
2. Vapour trail



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1. Chef at Il Principe e Il Pirata
2. Garden of Gabrio Bini at Serraghia
3. Cactuses thrive on the island
4. Terrace at Il Principe e Il Pirata
5. Lounging at Parco dei Sesi

On the volcanic Italian island of Pantelleria, dwarf trees grow low to protect themselves from the elements and the seas rack the coast into sharp bluffs. Even the architecture has adapted to the winds: the lava fields are dotted with *dammusi* (dwellings like miniature fortresses) constructed from rocks. The island submits to the forces of nature and feels little changed by the present epoch.

To holiday on this island requires resilience – like the rugged, raw experience of a sailboat or the desert. Yet this elemental existence is exactly what draws enthusiasts to the rocky outcrop in the southern Mediterranean. “You can’t fight this island,” says the happily eccentric winemaker Gabrio Bini, his moustache flapping as he speaks. “You just give in to its primordial charms.”

Bini has clearly taken his own advice. A longtime architect in Milan, he recounts his days hanging out with painter Lucio Fontana and their mutual friendship with Marcel Duchamp, as he pours a glass of his zibibbo (an ancient Muscat grape).

At Serraghia, the renowned winery he runs with his son, Giotto, the grapes are macerated in big terracotta amphorae buried in the volcanic tuff. His grapevines are planted deeper than normal, and are low growing, which protects them somewhat from the winds in this valley of fertile parklands at Pantelleria’s more sheltered centre. Close to the mouth of the active volcano, we sip wine as the otherworldly fumarole sends swells of vapour down from the mountaintop. A fast-moving and eerie geyser fog cloaks the slope as if it might soon overtake us as well.

Meanwhile, Geneviève, Bini’s wife, an advertising art director and equally urbane presence, cracks open fresh almonds that they’ve grown. The pair split their time between Milan and the farm huts they have converted into a home on the vineyard after falling in love with Pantelleria in the 1990s.



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“This isn’t an easy island,” Bini says of life here. “But only fools are looking for easy.”

The Binis are not the only stowaways from mainland Europe and city life. “Everyday, we’re amazed by the beauty of the landscape,” says Margot Panseca, a former model agent who left Paris to join her husband Massimiliano Panseca from Milan to live on Pantelleria. The pair opened Parco dei Sesi, an art residence and hotel that looks as ancient as the *dammusi*. It’s surrounded by some of the oldest remains on the island: 5,000-year-old piled-rock walls of the Neolithic period, still solid enough that we walk along their ramparts to visit the low-growing gardens, vast swimming pool.

Massimiliano’s father, an artist and architect, bought some land in Pantelleria’s north in the 1970s. He used a converted Fascist-era bunker as a workspace and put on art shows for locals. Today the Pansecas are inspired by his creative approach. “We wanted to be more than a hotel,” says Margot, seated among piles of kilim-covered pillows at one of Sesi’s driftwood tables. “As this place has been an inspiration here for Massimiliano’s

parents, we wanted to offer the same to younger artists.” Guests stay for a week at a time; a small selection of artists are invited to stay in the low season, working with the site’s onsite pottery kiln and painting studio, and leaving a work behind in exchange for the hospitality.

Secret gardens – known as *giardini panteschi* – abound in Pantelleria. Flowers and vegetables are planted inside circular stone walls to protect them from the drying, buffeting wind. Peek inside and you’ll find a verdant and humid citrus grove or olive trees tucked away from the elements. Like the *dammusi* homes, the origins of this architecture is said to date back to the beginning of Arab rule in 700AD. “This is an island that

1. Margot Panseca, an owner of Parco dei Sesi
2. Poolside at Parco dei Sesi
3. The island’s preferred vehicle, the Citroën Mehari
4. Glass of zibibbo
5. Spa time at Lago di Venere
6. Tanca Nina winemaker Francesco Ferreri



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remains ancient,” says Elio Rosa, owner of beachside restaurant La Vela, in Scauri, who points out a path to the old Roman baths on a cliff beside the water. “We’re stranded out here in the Med. It’s hard to get here and hard to get things to arrive here; it’s impossible to modernise.”

Throughout its history, Pantelleria has known a multitude of influences – ancient Iberians, Phoenicians, Romans, Arabs, Norman-led Sicilians and Italian unifiers all left their mark on the island – but these feel like minor incursions against the overlord that is nature. It’s the active volcano, gusting wind and furrowed sea that have shaped the terrain. It’s like Iceland in the Mediterranean or the face of the moon,

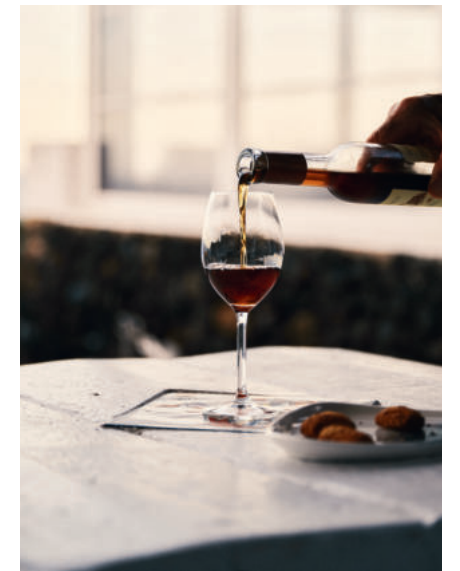


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The more sheltered swimming spots are naturally heated, thanks to the volcano. Locals like to relax at the thermal pools at Gadir, each tapped to hold a different temperature



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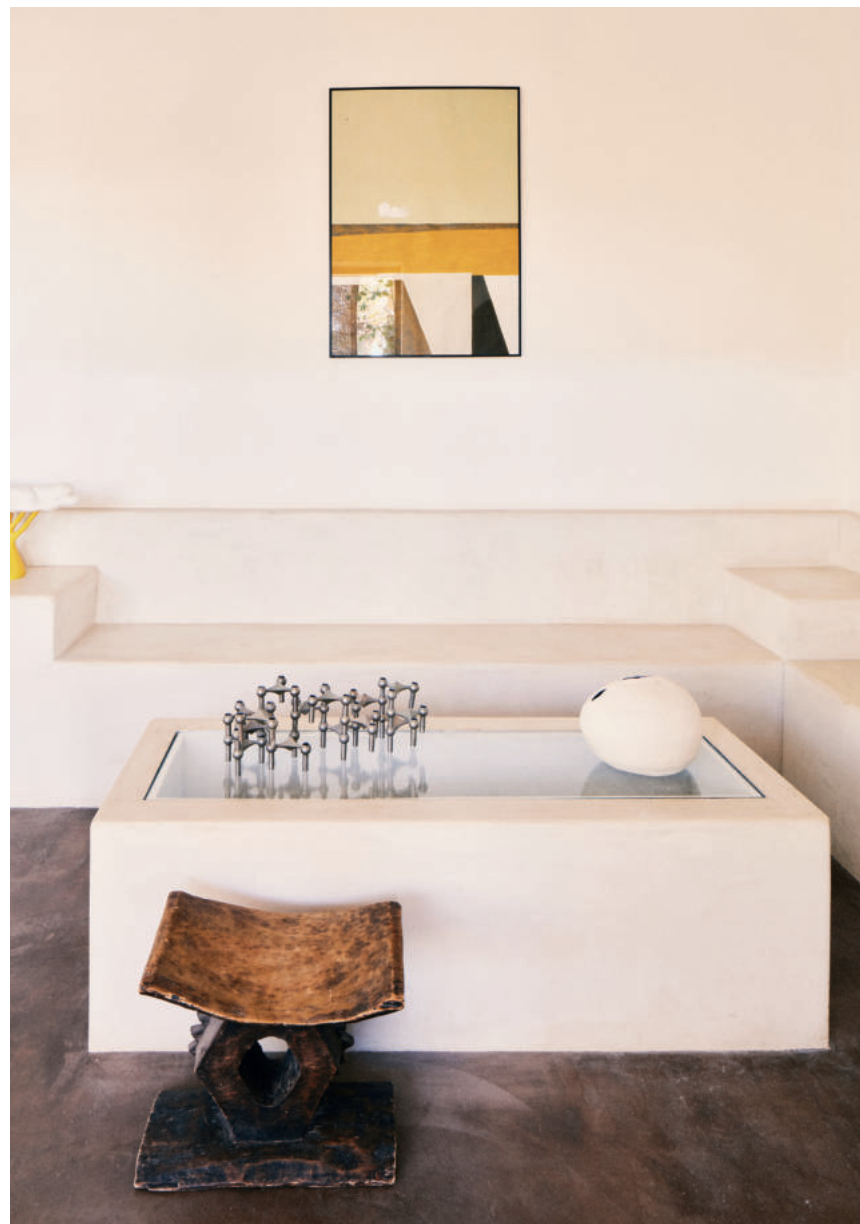
magically sprouting flowers – especially bougainvillea, whose wind-born petals float by like fuchsia butterflies. Closer to Tunisia than to any part of Italy, Pantelleria picks up the African nation's radio, and men favour the knitted *kufi* (skullcap) common on the coast there. Officially, the island is part of Sicily but it feels like a place between two lands. "It's the very opposite of my life at home," says a Milanese graphic designer wearing Prada sunglasses and a *kufi*.

Exploring the island in a beaten-up rental car, we drive past wild grapes and caper plants, slopes of paddle cactus, stunted palms and olive trees that grow no taller than children. Arriving at the shore is awe-inspiring, a moment to contemplate my own fragility in the face of these churning waters. On the island's lush eastern coast, at Cala Tramontana, a cement platform next to a rocky cove helps bathers get in the water but I feel like I'm swimming in a tornado. Meanwhile, just around a bend at Cala Levante – a small beach lined by cliffs – the water is serene enough that even children are paddling about happily. "You're at the mercy of the winds and the tides so we've all become weathermen here," says a resident.

The nearby Elefante beach – named for the cliff eroded into a monumental arch that resembles an elephant's trunk – possesses an astonishing grandeur and a sea-formed ramp to enter its swirling waters. Still, to clamber out as waves crash over me, I need a hand (really, the whole arm, of a kind stranger). Glancing around, I see some of the locals sport water shoes and a sun hat with a very sturdy chinstrap.

But there are also more sheltered swimming spots on Pantelleria, and thanks to the volcano, they are naturally heated. Islanders like to relax at the thermal pools at Gadir, each holding water at a different temperature (including scalding hot, so proceed with caution). In the island's central park, the chalcedony blue Lago Specchio di Venere is surrounded by hills so verdant and untouched that dinosaurs seem likely to emerge from the foliage. The lake floor of white clay is said to purify the skin: its shores are lined with mystic-looking bathers caked head-to-toe in the mud.

We finish the day at the Tanca Nica winery, a young couple have reclaimed two hectares of vineyards where the vines grow spontaneously, without wires or neat rows. Owner Francesco Ferreri looks out over the valley. "There's no controlling nature here," he says. "So you let nature show you the way." — K



1. Dining room at Il Principe e il Pirata
2. Room at Parco dei Sesi
3. Lunch at La Vela
4. Typical 'dammuso' dwelling
5. Pantelleria's rocky coast



Address book

Where to stay

Parco dei Sesi

Chic and serene, this bunker-turned-art residence and hotel welcomes creative types for island stays. parcodeisesi.com

Sikelia

With stark white *dammusi*, the hotel fits in with its island surroundings – an upscale yet understated oasis. sikeliapantelleria.com

What to drink

Serragghia

Gabrio and Giotto Bini's legendary winery helped build the reputation of Pantelleria and of Italian natural wine with its zibibbo grapes and fermentation in amphorae. iscawines.com

Tanca Nica

Making use of small plots of land that lay fallow on vacation properties, Nicoletta Pecorelli and Francesco Ferreri have reclaimed the island's artisanal wine-making tradition and introduced sought-after small-batch natural wines.

Where to eat

Isca

A stylish courtyard restaurant of tables surrounded by *dammusi* to rent, where the ambitious all-seafood menu includes home-cured fish.

Il Principe e il Pirata

With a terrace facing the water, this family-run seafood restaurant serves excellent dishes with regional ingredients, from capers to locally caught swordfish.

La Vela

A beach bar serving tasty island antipasti, including vegetable *ciaki ciuka* and Pantasca potato salad,

set on a relaxed stretch of pebble beach favoured by windsurfers. Don't miss the thermal tubs and Roman remains just a few steps away.

Gelateria Da Katia

The port town of Pantelleria was bombed and remains charmless, except for this superlative ice-cream joint serving the best almond granita on the island.

Panificio Marrone

A bakery with a surprising sea-view in the pretty town of Scauri and the place to stock up on focaccia for lunch on the beach – try the anchovies with purple onion.

Where to swim/steam

Arco dell'Elefante

A dramatic cliff leading to the water, with an elephant's trunk of rock a short swim away.

Lago Specchio di Venere

A volcanic crater of thermally heated waters with healing mud that bathers apply to their skin for open-air beauty treatments.

Bagno Asciutto

Bring candles and towels to enjoy this naturally formed hot sauna cave.

Cala Gadir

Natural hot springs in coastal pools at different temperatures, also popular with local people.

Cala Tramontana and Cala Levante

Neighbouring swimming spots at a curve on the eastern coast: one is always sure to have calm waters if the other doesn't.

Bue Marino

One of the calmer beaches on the island, with a small cove of smooth rocks that ease entry into and exit from the sea.